

HIS WIFE



HIS WIFE

By

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The Challenge
The Way of the North

With a Frontispiece by
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INDIANAPOLIS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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To My Literary Godmother
C. EMMA CHENEY

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CONTENTS

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| I The Going | 1 |
| II The Return | 32 |
| III Sara Meets With a Check | 69 |
| IV Luka Receives Advice | 95 |
| V Lisa's Fortune | 117 |
| VI Luka's Eyes Are Opened | 155 |
| VII The Man at the Tryst | 186 |
| VIII Thoma Goes A-Wooing | 214 |
| IX The Meeting on the Hill | 249 |
| X The Questioning of Lisa | 284 |
| XI The Rescue of Thoma | 320 |
| XII The Man Whom Luka Found | 340 |
| XIII Lisa's Story | 358 |

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CHAPTER I

THE GOING

God made some men slow in being moved, and when they told Luka Antonovitch Strukof that his wife was dead, he did not cry aloud or make other customary sign. He rose quickly to his feet and for a breathing space stood looking at the messengers with an intentness that was almost terror in his melancholy eyes. Then, without a word, he gathered the papers with which he had been at work and put them methodically aside; and passing out of the little room in the great barrack which served him for an office during the day, he went swiftly across the level ground to his own house at the gate of the stockade.

Nor did his bearing show how he was stirred when he had entered, and come into the chamber where the stricken woman was. The room was full of people and the sufferer still lay where

she had fallen, though some one with a rough attempt at kindness had propped a cushion underneath her head. The sound of the wailing ceased as he knelt beside her on the floor, and the place grew absolutely still as they waited to see what he would do. It was all one, though, to Luka Strukof, for he neither saw nor heard them as he bent above his wife and gently lifted up her hand.

“What is it, Kovya?” he said softly. “Tell me what it is?” The woman’s hand remained limp and unresponsive in his grasp and he shook it slightly to emphasize his demand.

“Kovya?” he said again with wistful tenderness, and at his insistence a stir of sympathy ran through the room. He heard it and lifted his face defiantly to the crowd.

“Why did you say that she was dead?” he said with searching challenge. He gathered the unresisting body in his arms and carried it to the bed along the wall. Then turning his back to it, he faced those in the room with an almost fierce impatience.

“Go!” he said harshly. “We wish to be alone.” He stood in rigid silence while the room was being cleared, letting his eyes rest

imperatively on one after another of the retreating crowd until the last of them was out. The only one who did not go was a girl of fifteen years, who up to this time had remained in the background among the others in the room. Her face was red with weeping and her eyes wide with the fear she could not put in words.

When they two were alone together, she came swiftly forward and, falling on her knees beside the bed, threw her arms convulsively around the unconscious woman's body and hid her face in her neck. Luka Antonovitch followed her movements with the same gloomy abstraction of glance with which he had watched the self-appointed mourners go. And then, bending his straight figure over her with the first human softening he had shown, he unclasped her hands and drew the girl gently back.

"Let her be still, Sara, until she wakens for herself," he said softly. The girl, however, was not won to his belief and shrank from him with a touch of her former fear. She tried bravely to speak what was in her mind, but before she could bring her lips to the service, he had seemingly forgotten her and her distress and, as if he were alone, turned himself

aimlessly to drawing up the covers and pressing them around the sufferer's neck. When there seemed to him no more of this to do, he bent again to the kneeling girl and, lifting her, drew her away into the middle of the room.

"You, too, had better go," he said with coaxing tenderness. "I shall wait here by your mother and call you when she wakes." The girl's eyes pleaded dumbly against dismissal, but she did not find the courage to object, and in the end, with a little sob, she went obediently away. Luka Antonovitch went with her to the door and smiled at her with reassuring confidence as she passed out. But once she was gone, he closed the door relentlessly behind her and she heard the grate of the bolt as he shot it in the lock.

All that afternoon the barrier remained raised between her and the two who up to this time had made for her her world. No one came to her from the outside and she spent the hours lying on the floor in front of the forbidden portal, fighting with her grief and listening with strained ears for sounds of what was going on within.

At dusk, she mustered courage to tap with

light hand on the panels of the door; and, receiving no response, she called with apologetic softness to the man within. Luka Antonovitch vouchsafed no answer and all her efforts failed of a return, save that once or twice she heard beyond the wall the muffled tread of his feet as he walked restlessly up and down. She remained at her post until midnight and it was completely dark. Then her heart failed her and she went to Akoulina Fedosyevna, the wife of the commandant, who had been her mother's closest friend.

The lady had been long since in bed, but arose at once on hearing who demanded her and came down in her slippers, holding together her yellow bed-gown which she had not taken time to button on the way. She was a tall, angular creature with sharp features and a somewhat forbidding air. But her heart warmed to the forlorn little figure that faced her in the shadow of the dimly lighted room, and there was only compassion in her voice, as she bent and drew the child gently to her side.

"Poor little fish!" she said almost in a whisper. "Is Praskovia Egorovna then really dead?" She had an arm that was a comfort

round the neck of one distressed, and in its shelter the child clung to her convulsively and, without answering, gave herself up unreservedly to tears.

Akoulina Fedosyevna waited until the first whirl of the storm was past and then, disengaging herself gently, drew the unresisting girl after her into her own room. Still without question, she settled the child among the covers on her bed, smoothed out her clothes and hair, and comforted her until the color slowly mounted in her cheeks and she commenced again to look somewhat composedly on life. The older woman watched her till she thought the process sufficiently complete and then began cautiously to draw from her the history of the day.

“You were right to come,” she said, after listening to the story to the end. “If your mother is alive, she should have Christian help. If she is dead, Luka Antonovitch should not deny to her the right of decent prayers. I will speak to my husband and we will go to her at once.” She went impetuously across the chamber and began beating with her hands upon the door of an adjoining room.

“Pavel! Pavel Pavelovitch!” she called. “Get up at once. Dress yourself quickly. There is a need!” There was no reply, and she repeated the demand, a note of impatience rising in her voice. Finally there was an answering rumble from beyond the partition wall, and Akoulina Fedosyevna desisted from her endeavors and came hurriedly to the child upon the bed.

“Men are so stupid,” she declared impatiently. “It takes an earthquake to wake them when once they are asleep!” Seizing her clothes from a chair, she retired with them behind a screen and for a time there was no sound in the room beyond the rustle of her strenuous dressing.

The agitation of it was at full height when the door of Pavel Pavelovitch’s chamber opened and the commandant himself stepped out into the room. Sara Lukievna had never before seen him shorn of his official clothes and she shrank back among her covers with a little cry of alarm. Pavel Pavelovitch, for his part, was equally surprised. He stood and gazed at the unexpected guest in blank amazement, though unconscious gallantry sent his hand to

his nightcap, so that he doffed and held it politely against his breast. Akoulina Fedosyevna discovered him before he was sufficiently composed to speak.

“Did I not tell you there was a haste?” she said sharply. “Go back at once and get something on your legs.” The little man blushed up to the roots of his hair. He gave a furtive glance down at his bare ankles and another of impotent fury at his wife. Then, without answer, he backed swiftly away, as if even in retreat he felt a need to keep the enemy honorably at his front, bounced smartly around the door and disappeared, shutting it after him with a bang.

“I have such trouble with him,” said the old lady severely. “He will know better the next time that he comes.” She finished her dressing and came out, folding and arranging a shawl for immediate use outside. Going to the door of his chamber, she called to her husband as before. He responded almost at once and this time he was dressed and carried himself with his usual air of conscious dignity.

“What is this—what is this?” he said with some severity. “Where is it you are taking

me at this hour of the night?" The old lady was too accustomed to his habit of opposition to be even temporarily abashed.

"It is a work of mercy," she answered with reproving seriousness. "We are going to the house at the gate to see if Praskovia Egorovna is still alive." Pavel Pavelovitch sniffed vigorously as an indication of his disapproval, but catching the wistful eyes of the girl fixed appealingly upon him, he thought better of his display of temper and quietly signified his assent.

"I was told that Luka Antonovitch did not wish to be disturbed," he said apologetically. "Otherwise I should have gone there long ago." Akoulina Fedosyevna put her arms around the girl and kissed her sympathetically.

"Remain here till morning," she said. "In my bed you will rest as safe as if you were in the bosom of Christ." Sara Lukievna, however, clung to her and would not let her go.

"You must, my dear!" said the old lady, mopping vigorously at her eyes. It had been a long time since a child had thus turned to her for sympathy and the warmth of the small body pressed against her breast brought an unwonted stirring at the heart.

"I believe God sent you," she said with a laugh that was half a sob. "It is like having my own again." She gave herself up unreservedly to the sensation and bent above the girl till her face was against the auburn head on her arm.

"Have no fear, child, for that which is to come," she whispered. "God grant that Praskovia Egorovna may not really be dead; but if she is, you will still find a mother in me as long as I am alive."

"You must arrange it for me, Pavel," she said later as they went along in the night. "I must have the child if Praskovia Egorovna is gone."

"Do not worry," he answered lightly. "When we get there you will find she is not dead." Akoulina Fedosyevna made no answer and they stumbled on in silence for a time. But the thing still stirred unsatisfied in her mind, and suddenly she took her husband by the arm and let her weight lean on him as she spoke.

"Pavel," she said with a tremulous thrill of speech, "do you not remember how our Thoma used to cling to me when he was distressed?"

There was no sign of life apparent when they

came to the house at the gate. The door stood open as Sara Lukievna had left it, and at no point within was there any gleam of light. Pavel Pavelovitch stopped his wife at the threshold and listened vainly for some guiding sound. Then, acting on the information gathered from the child, they groped their way cautiously through the empty rooms to the door before which Sara Lukievna had kept watch. The commandant tried it softly and found that it was locked. He tapped upon it lightly and then with increasing force, and, when there was no answer, raised his voice and called loudly to the man within.

“Do you hear me, Luka Antonovitch?” he shouted. “It is I, Pavel Pavelovitch, who speaks. I command you to open the door!” There was a stir from the room beyond, the bolt turned softly in the lock, and the door gave slowly back. It opened about a quarter of the way and Luka Antonovitch appeared in the opening and stood looking furtively out. With one hand he kept hold upon the latch so that without leave no one should pass by him into the room. In the other he held a small lamp, raised high above his head, so that his eyes

should not be dazzled by the light as he looked. The lamp gave so faint a light that it showed nothing clearly and served to accentuate the shadows in the place rather than to make distinct the figures of the man and woman who stood before him in the gloom. When he saw that it was indeed the commandant, his vigilance relaxed.

“What is it that you want?” he said cautiously. The commandant’s impatience ran away with his self-control.

“Want?” he echoed, raising his big voice. “What I want is to know why you and your wife shut yourselves up in this mysterious way, and refuse to receive people when they come!” Luka Antonovitch calmly ignored both the commandant’s irritation and his question, and warningly held up his hand.

“Be still!” he said softly. “Kovya Egorovna is not yet awake.” Akoulina Fedosyevna caught the words and pushed by her husband with a cry of joy.

“Then she is really alive?” she demanded breathlessly. He fixed his eyes on her with the sober intentness which had been looking out of them from the time he first heard of his wife’s

attack, and as he understood the question his face relaxed into a smile.

“Yes, she is alive,” he said gently. Akoulina Fedosyevna pushed against him and made as if she would have passed him by.

“Thank God!” she cried. “Take me to her at once that I may see her with my eyes.” But Luka Antonovitch stubbornly barred the way and would not let her pass.

“No, no,” he said, as if speaking to a child. “Kovya Egorovna is asleep, and it would not be well to disturb her till she wakes.” Akoulina Fedosyevna remembered what Sara Lukievna had said about her father’s mistaken confidence, and was determined to examine the matter for herself.

“Let me look at her then, at least,” she pleaded. “I shall not so much as breathe while I am there!” Luka Antonovitch showed no signs of yielding, and kept his body stubbornly in the way.

“No one can go in until she wakes,” he answered, and pushed her gently back.

“This is rank nonsense!” cried the commandant. “If we do not go in, how can we tell what is to be done?” He came forward with

the evident intention of forcing his way into the room. Luka Antonovitch divined his purpose and in his eyes there began to burn a spark of fire.

“Take care!” he cried warningly. “I have said that no one can come in.” Pavel Pavelovitch was a choleric man and, moreover, was not used to having his commands disputed by those around him at the post. He continued on his way and, without attempt at answer, pressed himself in between Luka Antonovitch and Akoulina Fedosyevna.

“It is an order,” he announced with dignity, and laid his hand on Luka Antonovitch’s breast. The latter shook himself free from the other’s touch and, without a show either of anger or of fear, seized the little man by the shoulder and thrust him away from him so that he went sprawling backward on the floor. Then without further attention to his discomfiture, he turned to Akoulina Fedosyevna with his former deprecatory smile.

“I think it is better that we be left alone,” he said with the same quiet conviction, and before the astonished woman could recover her equanimity, he had closed the door tightly and

locked it in her face. Pavel Pavelovitch scrambled nimbly to his feet, but before he could begin a new advance, Akoulina Fedosyevna had found him in the dark and pinioned him tightly in her arms.

"Let me go!" he shouted, and struggled to be free.

"I will not," she answered. "What could you do against Luka Antonovitch as he now is? He is not himself, Pavel. His grief has turned his mind."

"So much the worse for him, then!" he panted in the close embrace. "Are you going to let Praskovia Egorovna die there without help?"

"About that, there is no knowing," she answered, "but Luka Antonovitch may be right. Let the matter go until morning and then, if he does not admit you, you can have him put under arrest." The grip of her arms remained firm around him and the little man after a moment gave up the ineffectual struggle and announced a truce.

"Very well, then," he said with a sudden return to his rotund speech. "We will give him the benefit of the doubt." He freed himself

from her embrace and walked with offended dignity to the door.

“Luka Antonovitch!” he called in his most official tone, and struck the wood threateningly with his hand. “We are going now for the night, but to-morrow at eight o’clock I shall come again and then, my friend, you will have to open the door!”

Pavel Pavelovitch was never a man to forget his word and eight o’clock found him punctually back with a posse of four men behind him to carry out his commands. The house at the gate was as empty and silent as it had been the night before, and no man forbade the uninvited guests as they stealthily entered. The door of Luka Antonovitch’s chamber was still closed and the commandant came to a halt in front of it and motioned to his companions to stand close.

He struck the door loudly and called imperiously to the man within. The culprit made no answer and almost unconsciously the commandant tried the latch. To his surprise it turned readily and let the door give inward with his hand. With a motion of his head and a significant look at his men, he swung it wide

open and the whole party burst impetuously into the room beyond.

Then, as suddenly, they stopped and stood looking at one another with astonished eyes; for the place was empty and there was no sign in it of either the man or the woman they had come to seek. Pavel Pavelovitch was the first to recover himself, and after a swift glance which took in the whole apartment he went across to the bed against the wall.

“Luka Antonovitch was a wise man,” he said quietly. “He understood me last night when I said that I would come.” He remained for some moments looking absently down at the empty couch and running his hand here and there among the covers as if he hoped to find Praskovia Egorovna still hidden somewhere in the folds. Then with a shrug, he straightened himself and turned to the waiting men.

“He is no longer here,” he said shortly, “though I can not believe that he has wandered far away. Look into the matter for me without delay and report to me as soon as he is found.”

The finding of the fugitive proved less easy than the commandant had thought. The search

was strenuous, but it only brought to light that no one had seen him when he went away and that he had found shelter in no habitation of the post. He had taken his wife and vanished utterly with her into the night. Realizing the hopelessness of following him successfully into the wilderness outside the town, after an ineffectual day, the commandant saw no plan worth while but to call in the pursuit and wait with such patience as he might until the thing should resolve itself in its own natural way.

It was Akoulina Fedosyevna who first brought news of him again. She had gone to the house at the gate to fetch required clothing for the child, and came upon him without warning, sitting alone at the table in the dusk of his great front room. He had set out a meal and was eating hungrily, but he paused on seeing her and gave her recognition by a bend of the head, though he did not rise or speak.

It was like raising a ghost to come upon him thus unexpectedly in the shadowy indistinctness of the place and, for a moment, Akoulina Fedosyevna felt her heart stand still. She caught her breath and instinctively made the

sign of the cross and then, after an instant, felt the blood begin to move again in her veins. Luka Antonovitch, having made the first recognition of her presence, paid no further attention to her and went on composedly with his meal. She waited till she could more fully control her voice and then spoke to him.

“Is it really you, Luka Antonovitch?” she demanded tremulously. “Where is Praskovia Egorovna? Why have you taken her away?” The man turned his haggard face toward her and she could see that the dull fire of his possession still burned in his heavy eyes.

“I have taken her where she will not be disturbed,” he said sullenly. The sound of his voice broke wholesomely in on the glamour of unreality which her dread had raised about him and she felt her fear of him fall suddenly away. Without a qualm she went across to him and laid her hand appealingly on his arm.

“Why will you not let me see her?” she said pleadingly. “You can not have forgotten how I have been her friend!” He did not answer for the moment but sat looking at her with suspicious eyes.

“You know that Kovya Egorovna is not

dead?" he said abruptly. There was so much of challenge in his tone that Akoulina Fedosyevna instinctively understood.

"Why should I doubt it?" she said, though her voice shook so that it belied her words. Luka Antonovitch found evident satisfaction in her answer, though he still looked at her with questioning eyes.

"You are sure?" he persisted.

"Yes, I am sure," she answered; and this time her voice was fairly steady and she forced herself to look him squarely in the eyes. He nodded gravely as if pleased with the reply.

"Very well," he said, "when I am fed, I will show you where she is." She nursed her patience till the meal was done, afraid to hurry him, lest an ill-advised word should lead to the withdrawal of his hardly won consent. He finished, though, at last, and rose from his place.

"Come," he said, and strode to the entrance door. He paused there for a moment to make sure that no one was in sight, and then slipped quietly out and along the south wall of the house and so through the gate of the stockade, the woman at all times following close behind.

He skirted the fence to the northern angle and then, after a quick look around to assure himself that they were not observed, increased his speed almost to a run and plunged across the open space to the nearest fringe of trees. Once there, he stopped and, turning on Akoulina Fedosyevna almost savagely, gripped her tightly by both arms.

“You are sure!” he demanded fiercely.

“Yes,” she panted, and, between her excitement and her fear, her voice was almost a scream. He was content with the answer and let her go, and waited patiently till she could get her breath. Then they went on in the shadow of the trees, taking a path that gradually led them to the higher ground. It was not so dark but she could see him easily there before her in the way, but only once again did she speak to him before the journey found its end. He turned from time to time to see if she were still behind, and on one of these occasions she mustered courage to propound to him the question which from the beginning had been trembling on her tongue.

“Praskovia Egorovna,” she said; “has she wakened yet?” He stopped short as if he had

been struck and came back till he stood close to her, with something that was almost menace in his look. But her eyes met his fearlessly and after a moment the bitterness went out of his glance and he stepped farther back.

"I forgot that you believe she is alive," he said gently. Then recollecting the question, he answered it frankly and without delay. "No," he said, "she has not wakened—but in the night, last night, I heard her speak." Akoulina Fedosyevna felt her heart go out to him in his loneliness, but she feared to question him further in his present mood. He waited till he was sure she had no more to ask him and then started on, leaving her to follow as before.

They came at last to an open space with a great stream of white across it like a fan. Akoulina Fedosyevna recognized it as the dead glacier which ran back like a river up between the hills behind the post. The strange journey continued till they came to its very edge, and then Luka Antonovitch halted and turned to his companion with a smile.

"This is the place," he said quietly. "Wait here a moment till I come." Without stopping for her reply, he swung himself down into an

adjacent gully, passed round a projecting wall of rock, and disappeared apparently into the face of the ice-bank itself.

He was back almost at once, and beckoned her to come. He did not offer to assist her and she scrambled as well as she could down the shaly slope. Between the exertion and the excitement, her heart was beating like a hammer as she passed round the barrier of rock and found herself in a wider space beyond.

The chamber was formed partly by the hollow in the bank, but some force of nature had further eaten out the side of the glacier itself so that there was an opening in it like a little room. Akoulina Fedosyevna looked for her companion and saw him on his knees by the farther inner wall. At the same moment she discovered Praskovia Egorovna and knew that her search was at an end.

Either because it was the most secret place he knew of, or, as is more probable, because beneath the fixed idea of his possession there lingered the fear that after all she might be really dead, Luka Antonovitch had made rare choice and had brought his wife to the one haven where, alive or dead, he could keep her

during his own pleasure most securely for himself. He had established her in the innermost corner of the place, laying her in state on a narrow shelf of ice. He was talking to her as if he had no doubt but she could hear, but Akoulina Fedosyevna required no evidence outside of sight to know that the woman was beyond all human help.

The horror of the thing, and the pity of it, took hold of her with overwhelming force and she stood gazing dumbly at the tragedy before her, without the power either to move forward or to go away. Suddenly the kneeling man remembered that he had brought her in and turned and looked at her with a gaze so trenchantly compelling that she forgot her confusion in her desire to do exactly the thing which he seemed to wish.

With a quick indrawing of her breath, she went forward and came to him, taking her place so close to the dead woman that she could have touched her, had she wished. Luka Antonovitch kept his eyes steadily upon her and waited impatiently for her to speak. She strove to think of something that would not belie too harshly his belief that the inanimate

clay before them still held its soul, and yet within such distance of the truth that her face should not betray her as she said it. Yet the truth was too real and dreadful to be absolutely set aside and, in her perplexity, she avoided the real issue and spoke to one less vital and germane.

“You have indeed done much,” she began tremulously, “but, for recovery, will Praskovia Egorovna not need many things you can not give her here?” She put out her hand and laid it compassionately against the dead woman’s cheek, but Luka Antonovitch resented the contact, and lifting the hand set it jealously aside.

“She will need nothing more until she wakes,” he declared obstinately. In her excitement, Akoulina Fedosyevna forgot her fear of him and took hold with both hands upon his arm.

“But what if she never wakes?” she cried sharply. “Why do you shut your eyes against the truth? She is dead, Luka Antonovitch. You can not but know that she is dead!” Her earnestness had at least so much of effect upon him that he did not at once fly into a rage. He

looked at her and then at his wife, passing his hand confusedly across his eyes, as if he did not fully understand. Then, with rare tenderness, he bent and pushed back the hair from around the dead woman's face, and with his hand held protectingly against her head, as if in reassurance, looked around at Akoulina Fedosyevna with his melancholy smile.

"She is not dead to me," he said simply. "You know she spoke to me last night." But Akoulina Fedosyevna would not be turned aside.

"It was her spirit, then," she cried. "And that might be, for this is only the second day. But after to-morrow, Luka Antonovitch, even that will be gone and what shall you do then?"

"She will not go," he declared defiantly. "Until I am ready, I shall hold her here."

She looked at him with growing horror in her face.

"Would you then make her lose her peace for all eternity?" she demanded. "Remember that if she is to have her place in Heaven, to-morrow she must be free to go for the first time before God."

"But she is not dead!" he broke out testily,

and all her efforts left him still bound to the one thought. She urged the case with tears and pleading and more than once uncorked the vials of her wrath. But to prayers and protestation alike he remained deaf, and at length the strain of the struggle bent her to the breaking and she suddenly let him go.

“It is too much!” she cried. “I can not bear it. God will judge you, Luka Antonovitch; and if I understand Him, as I think, He will not be as lenient as I.” He did not even answer her, but began talking in a low tone to his wife. She saw that for the moment, at least, he had forgotten her again, and, heart-sick at the futility of beating thus against a wall, she threw up her hands with a despairing gesture and fled unsteadily out into the night.

Yet so much impressed was Akoulina Fedosyevna with the sincerity of purpose which underlay Luka Antonovitch’s conduct toward his wife that she shrank instinctively from telling the story of it to her husband, lest he should counsel the taking of Praskovia Egorovna away by force. But the commandant simply shrugged his shoulders when he heard.

“Our cunning must be like to his,” he said. “Leave it to me and I shall find a way.” He took no immediate action other than to post a sentry at the place so that, without his knowledge, no further flitting should be made. But the next evening, when hunger drove the demented fugitive to leave his refuge and return to the house at the gate for further food, the commandant seized his opportunity and took the body from the place and brought it secretly to his house.

He looked for trouble when Luka Antonovitch, returning, should make certain of his loss. But to his astonishment, the man went down into his chamber in the ice and there remained, making no sign that he had found things other than they were. And so, without interruption, they buried Praskovia Egorovna in the night, and Akoulina Fedosyevna saw to it that she had proper prayers.

Next day at noon the bereaved man appeared unexpectedly at the great house and asked for the commandant’s wife by name.

“You were right,” he said abruptly, when she had come. “Praskovia Egorovna has gone away.” The greeting was so different from

the whirlwind of reproach which she had reason to expect, that it left Akoulina Fedosyevna uncertain what to say.

“What are you going to do?” she stammered.

“I shall stay at the house at the gate and wait till she returns,” he answered. “Where is the child?”

“She is here and well,” she answered. “But let me keep her, Luka Antonovitch. Surely, with no woman in the house, it would be better for her here.”

“No,” he said, with the obstinate setting of his jaw she had come to understand. “I shall need her myself about the house, and it would not be right that she should be away when Praskovia Egorovna returns.”

Akoulina Fedosyevna submitted gracefully, and Luka Antonovitch took the girl away. He settled down quietly in his lonely house and began to draw together, with such skill as he could, the raveled strands of his old family life. It was a joyless task and hard, and went more slowly that there always stayed with him the fixed idea, which was a form of madness, that though his wife was gone she would as

certainly come back. He entered without murmur upon his work and performed with brute-like faithfulness the tasks that he was set.

But there were days when the wild ferment in his brain stirred him beyond control, so that he forgot the duty at his hand, and wandered out into the nooks and corners of the settlement in pathetic search of the woman who did not come. And these seizures grew upon him till one day when the west-going packet was about to sail, he came to Akoulina Fedosyevna, leading Sara Lukievna by the hand.

“Take her,” he said, “and care for her till I come again. I have had a message. Praskovia Egorovna is yonder on the other side, and I am going there to bring her home.”

When the time came for parting, he took Sara Lukievna in his arms and held her tight against his breast.

“Do not cry,” he said, and bent his black curls down against her hair. “It will not be for long, and I am leaving you that you may keep the house so that your mother will find it as she left it when she went away.” But the girl, without his disability to make her blind, saw little promise of his swift return, and clung

in an agony of desolation to this one person who alone belonged to her in life. Luka Strukof warmed responsively to her demonstrations and for a moment held her tight. Then with a curious return of impassivity, he loosened the clasp of her hands and set her firmly to one side. She made no attempt to follow him, but stood, a desolate little figure, with hands clasped and eyes that refused to weep, and watched him as he took his place with the others in the boat and was rowed swiftly down the river to where the packet was anchored at its mouth. She did not move or make a sign till he had passed entirely from her sight, and then, without a word, she fled blindly to the house at the gate and shut herself up in her dead mother's room. And that was the last that was seen of Luka Strukof in Kussilof for more than two long years.

CHAPTER II

THE RETURN

But he did come back again. No one knew of his intention and his return was a surprise. It came afterward, as a curious thing, to Pavel Pavelovitch that the man had been unexpectedly in his thought on the very morning that he reappeared. Some years bring with them so much of trouble that they seem to have held more than their just span of days, and the commandant, lying in his bed at daybreak of that day, and ruminating on the months which had passed since Luka Strukof went away, had realized suddenly that the stress of living them had made him old.

“Why could he not have waited till things were better placed?” he thought resentfully, and turned toward the wall so that he should not have to face the growing light. He had found no man skilled enough about the post to take Luka Strukof’s vacant place, and the sense of injury grew in him as he remembered

that for all this time he had been doing double work.

But this was by no means the only thing that had laid a burden on Pavel Kolomin's mind. He could not yet think calmly of the settlement at St. Nikolas which Grigory Konovalof was so carefully building up. Cook's Inlet was hardly big enough for two such posts and it seemed incredible, if the Company was satisfied with his work, that they had sent out this man to divide authority with him and balk him in his plans. And then, too, there was their new blockhouse overlooking his own ground! The thought of it was too much for the commandant's temper, and he sat up suddenly and glared out through the window to where across the river he could see the outline of the building well begun.

"Konovalof shall pay for this!" he cried, swinging his legs out savagely on to the floor. "It was bad enough to have him twenty miles away!" He raised his fist and shook it angrily at the imaginary foe and stopped short in the middle of the gesture, for there was a sharp tapping at the door and his wife came in upon him without waiting for the word.

She was resplendent in a fresh gown of green

cotton cloth and had a spray of clover blossoms fastened in her hair. In her hand she held a little tray of wood which was carefully covered with a cloth. She swept across the room to him in an eager trot and, with an exclamation of joy which had in it a mild suggestion of reproof, wound her disengaged arm around his neck and, pushing back his night-cap, kissed him soundly on his disheveled head.

“Ah, Pavel,” she cried in her precise nasal speech, “to have a name-day and be not yet up!” The little man extricated himself dexterously from her caress and passed his hand impatiently across his hair.

“What day is it?” he demanded in bewilderment. Akoulina Fedosyevna stood back from him with a shrill cackle of scorn.

“It is Peter and Paul’s day, of course,” she said. “The day you chose for yourself as name-day when you were confirmed.” Pavel Pavelovitch’s face cleared and he turned to his wife with affection in his eyes.

“So it is, so it is!” he said gently. He could not at once, however, throw off in its entirety the burden of his depression, and after a moment his glance went away from her again and

out through the window as before. "I wish the people over there would give me a little less to think of for a time," he added with a sigh. The old lady made an impulsive step forward, as if she contemplated taking him again in her arms.

"It is an outrage, that place!" she cried indignantly. "We are not here wrongly that we should be watched like thieves!" Pavel Pavlovitch did not even look around.

"You do not know what tales may have been sent to Lebidef," he said quietly, "and it is not right to blame him till we know the grounds for his complaint. Konovalof says the Company has given him control. It is only because he does not show me his authority that I will not recognize his right." She did not answer and continued to look out the window as before. Then with a shrug of patient resignation, he turned to her with a smile.

"What is it you have there?" he asked, pointing to the tray. Akoulina Fedosyevna promptly covered the enveloping napkin with a protecting hand. Her smile came back and she was again the radiant creature she had been when she came in.

"Oh," she said archly, "it is a surprise! But it was Sara did it, and I am not to let you see till she is here. You must dress quickly that she may show you when she comes." Pavel Pavelovitch yawned and began to fumble at the strings of his cap. Akoulina Fedosyevna set down her burden on the table and, going to the window, hurriedly turned her back.

"I shall not look," she said primly. The old man sniffed contemptuously and proceeded with exasperating deliberation to draw on his clothes. His wife remained where she was and when he had finished she was gazing out toward the river with such utterly absorbed attention that she did not hear him as he went to her and laid his hand upon her arm.

"What is it that you see?" he said. Akoulina Fedosyevna gave a little scream of dismay and, seizing him by the arms, pushed him hastily back.

"You must not look!" she cried. "It is part of the surprise." The commandant let her have her way and she convoyed him to the middle of the room.

"What treason are you plotting with those people over there?" he said, drawing down his

brows with a studied assumption of severity. Akoulina Fedosyevna scornfully tossed her head.

"Those people? It is not those," she cried. "I would not touch them with a stick!"

"But Sara Lukievna would and you said it was her surprise."

"Sara Lukievna would not," she retorted sharply. "It is a slander, Pavel. You will have to have a button sewed on your mouth."

"For all that," he rejoined hotly, "I saw her talking with two of them from there last night." The old lady opened her mouth to contradict, but a second thought came to her. She stopped and looked at Pavel Pavelovitch with a sudden comprehension in her glance.

"Ah, that then is how she got the news!" she said triumphantly.

"What news?" Akoulina Fedosyevna's face became suddenly sphinx-like and she shook her finger reprovingly at him as she spoke.

"You should not want to ask," she said. "It is part of the surprise."

"Well, be quick about this surprise or my patience will not last," declared the commandant warningly. The old lady could not

resist the opportunity of delivering the last word.

“There it is!” she cried and lifted up her hands. “You do not try to hurry and so what can we do?” She did not wait for an answer but trotted animatedly to the door and, opening it a little, thrust her head through and called vigorously aloud.

“Come at once, Sara,” she said, “and be careful with the things.” The girl must have been listening for the summons, for almost on the word she appeared on the threshold and came in, carrying a load of dishes and other necessities for the morning meal.

The two years of her father’s absence had worked in her a startling change. She had shot up to full woman’s height and was long and colty, and so slim that her figure seemed almost unsteady as she walked. But she had her father’s eyes and his high, fine carriage of the head and there was in her expression an engaging air of frankness that belied the physical evidences of her immaturity and spoke her as being on friendly terms with herself and life. She advanced briskly to the table and, depositing the things which she held, went at once to

Pavel Pavelovitch and, setting her hands on his shoulders, put up her face to be kissed.

“Good greeting, little father,” she said breathlessly. “Is it not splendid on your name-day just to be alive? We are to breakfast here by ourselves and you are to have curds and a pie with poppy seeds, and four little cucumbers that came from the house at the gate. Vassili Balin raised them under fish-skin frames. He has no imagination, though, and declared they should be left till they were big. But after I had picked them and he learned they were for you, he was reconciled and sent you with them a good wish.” She fluttered away from him without waiting for an answer, moved out the table and fairly danced around it in her impatient haste. Akoulina Fedosyevna helped her with her task and under their skilled manipulation the cloth was soon laid and the covers set in neat and orderly array. The commandant watched the process with much interest and nodded with grave approval when the final touch went on.

“But why have you set for four?” he said. “Is there some one yet to come?” Akoulina Fedosyevna’s eyes went to those of the younger

woman in a swift significant glance, and in a sort of panic she whirled around, pounced on Pavel Pavelovitch's bed, rolled it up hurriedly and set about carrying it from the room. She paused, though, before she left the chamber long enough to say:

“You must ask Sara that. It is perhaps the young man from across the river she was talking with last night.” The girl flushed redly at the unexpected accusation and turned to her adopted father with a scornful uplift of her head.

“So you had to tell her!” she said with an airy show of sarcasm in her voice. “Just because you saw it, you could not keep it to yourself!” The old man's hand went up to his mouth and he cleared his throat deprecatingly, as he tried to meet her glance. But he did not come to his explanation, for before he could rightly arrange his speech there was a sudden outcry in the house outside and Akoulina Fedosyevna burst back into the room and, rushing at Sara Lukievna, caught her agitatedly in her arms.

“Sara!” she cried, “Sara! There is other news!” The girl was visibly startled, but she

put her arms about the excited woman and strove to calm her to connected speech.

“What is it, matiushka?” she said gently. “Has the boat after all, then, failed to come?”

“No, no,” returned the other solemnly. “It is a new surprise—one for you alone. Your father has returned and has sent for you to come.” The color went out of Sara Lukievna’s face and she looked at her foster mother in a kind of dazed bewilderment.

“My father!” she repeated slowly. “My father!” Akoulina Fedosyevna clung to her with sobs and lamentations, but, after the first moment of astonishment, the girl collected herself with a rare effort at equanimity, though she could not hide the uneasiness which looked furtively out of her eyes.

“Where is he?” she asked unsteadily.

“At the house at the gate. He sent Vassili Balin to bring the news.” The girl unwound herself from Akoulina Fedosyevna’s detaining embrace and went to Pavel Pavelovitch and put her arms affectionately around his neck.

“You will always seem as much of a father to me as my real father,” she said wistfully.

“I must go to him if he has really come, but I

wish I could stay here long enough for the surprise we had planned for you to-day." She let her hands fall and turned to Akoulina Fedosyevna, the tears gathering in her eyes.

"Let me tell him now," she pleaded. "I want to have that much of it before I go." The old lady sniffed with visible sympathy and waved a magnanimous assent.

"Go on," she said. "It would be but a little time, anyway, before he knew!" The girl's face brightened and she turned again to the old man.

"Little father," she cried, "what is it you have been wishing for most these last three weeks? What is that you would ask for most to-day?" The commandant's face lit up with an almost childish glow of anticipation.

"Not Thoma!" he half whispered. "The ship is not yet come?"

"Yes, it is come, though it went on to St. Nikolas, because that is the larger place. Thoma has to come back from there by boat. I had it from the man across the river that he would be here to-day." Pavel Pavelovitch gave a wild shout of joy and seized the girl excitedly in his arms.

“My son!” he cried. “It is indeed a good surprise.” He let her go, though, almost at once and with increasing agitation seized upon his wife. “Why do we wait?” he cried. “Let us go out and meet him as he comes!” The two women fastened simultaneously upon him and strove to hold him back.

“You must be patient, Pavel,” said Akoulina Fedosyevna. “The boat has not yet come in sight. We have set Masha to watch and she will tell us the first moment it is seen.” The commandant ran abstractedly to the window, and began searching each portion of the river with his eyes. The two women followed him, and seeing that his attention was wholly taken, Sara Lukievna took hold of him with a sudden burst of tears.

“You have forgotten me already,” she cried. “When Thoma comes, you will care for him more than you do for me!” Pavel Pavelovitch turned instantly, and put his hand lovingly on her shoulder.

“It is my son who comes to me after seven years,” he said with gentle gravity. “But you are no less my daughter, and I trust God will never let you pass out of my heart.” Sara

Lukievna's self-control gave way completely and she broke into violent sobbing and hid her face in his neck. He drew her close and patted her shoulder sympathetically with his hand, but finding that she could not gain again her self-control, she resisted and pushed back.

"Let me go!" she cried wildly and shook herself free from his embrace. Then, without a word to either one, she covered her face with her hands, and ran swiftly from the room. They heard her footsteps echo as she passed through the house and a moment later saw her from the window, moving swiftly across the open ground on her way to the house at the gate.

She slowed her pace and dried her eyes before coming to the place and so was more collected when she reached it and found her father standing in the door. She stopped short when she saw him and her heart began to beat so that she could feel it strike against her breast. Luka Antonovitch was in some sort of reverie and stood with his hands pressed tightly together, so that he did not hear her as she came, and the girl had time fully to take note of him before she made her presence known.

Absence had brought small change in his former looks. He had still the tall, straight figure of a young and active man, though the trouble of the days since she had seen him had streaked his hair with gray and set deep lines about his mouth and eyes. His dress was neat and his long boots were as carefully creased about the ankles as in the days before her mother's death.

Her heart went out to him, in spite of the vague fear which for the moment had held her to the spot. With a certain accession of courage, she pulled herself together and went forward to where he stood. The noise of her coming roused him from his reverie and he dropped his hands and turned to her with the confused look of one who suddenly awakes from sleep. He recognized her at once and bent to her with a tenderness which transfigured his whole face.

"How you have grown, child!" he said wonderingly. "I have thought about you much in the days I have been gone; but all the time you came to me only as the little girl you were when I went away." She had forgotten the caressing tenderness that was a quality of his

voice, and, hearing it now thus suddenly again, the appeal in it shook her self-control. With wild abandon she seized hold upon him and hid her face against his breast.

“Oh, why did you stay away from me so long?” she cried.

“Surely you know the reason,” he said gravely. “I thought to find your mother there on the other side and bring her back.”

“But you did not!” broke in the girl protestingly. “You could not!” Luka Antonovitch’s face lighted with his enigmatic smile and he stroked her hair caressingly for a moment before he spoke.

“That is with God,” he said finally. “He alone knows how far they were the same.” The strangeness of the answer woke Sara Lukievna to alarmed question and she lifted up her head.

“What do you mean?” she asked breathlessly. The man’s face sobered and his cheeks reddened with a sudden flush.

“It was only in spirit. I know it was only that,” he said, speaking hurriedly, as if the thing was something concerning which there had been debate. “But when you see her, I think you, too, will understand.”

“See whom?” cried the girl sharply.

“Your mother. Come, I will take you to her now.” He loosened her arms and set her back from him, and, grasping her by the hand, began to draw her after him into the house.

The thing which he proposed was so fantastic and improbable that Sara Lukievna could not believe that he was in sane mind. A heart-sick fear of what he might be going to do to her swept over her like a flood, and, as he started to go in, she braced herself and pulled sharply back. Luka Antonovitch paid small attention to her disinclination, and, as if she were still the child that he remembered, swept her along after him through the house to what had before been her mother’s room. At the threshold of the open door he paused.

“Lisa,” he called, “are you there?” A woman who was lying on the bed against the farther wall stirred at the question, and got hurriedly to her feet.

“Why, Luka,” she said, “are you come back? I thought you had gone to the commandant’s to fetch the child.” Her voice was full and deep and had a curious vibrant thrill. She paid no attention to Sara Lukievna, but came swiftly

across to Luka Antonovitch and put her hand upon his arm.

"I am glad that you came back," she said, and her tone was like a caress. Her eyes fixed themselves on his with a compelling effort at appropriation, and she leaned her face out toward him with the dumb affection of an animal in her glance. The man, however, made no response in kind. His eyes avoided hers and lifting her hand he set it gently from his arm.

"This is the child," he said with some constraint. "I have spoken with her and she will show you where things are about the house."

The woman's eyes followed his, but she made no effort to put back her hand.

"I will speak with her, if you wish," she said tremulously. She glanced down swiftly at the girl, but otherwise did not stir from her position and remained with her face leaned out and her eyes fixed on his, as if in the hope that ultimately her advances must compel from him some return in kind.

But if this was her purpose, she failed of her reward. Luka Antonovitch stood silent for a moment and did not look at her at all. There was nothing of anger or aversion in his face,

but he seemed bound by some sort of conscious repression which prevented him for the time from giving way to what he felt.

"Well, I will leave her with you then," he said finally. He balanced uncertainly on his feet, glanced at Sara Lukievna to see that she had understood, and still avoiding to look or to speak to the older woman at his side, turned himself about and went out into the other room.

The woman watched his departure with quivering lips. She was a splendid creature, tall as a man, with black hair and eyes and a carriage of body and head that was fairly regal in its self-assumption. She was like a goddess rather than a woman, and her divinity sat upon her with a conscious dignity that awed to silence the girl who, during the colloquy between her and Luka Antonovitch, had stood dumbly by.

The woman waited with the same tense attitude of expectation till Luka Antonovitch was surely gone. Then she turned to Sara Lukievna with her tragic unhappiness still working in her face. The gaze she bent upon the girl was searching though not unkindly. Sara Lukievna shrank before it, but the impulse was

rather because of the strength of the woman's personality which lay behind her glance than because the attention was positively unpleasant in itself.

"So you are Sara," she said unsteadily. "You are older and not what I thought you would be from what your father said. But you are enough like him in so many ways that I could love you for that if for nothing else." The girl's keen astonishment, together with an unreasoning sense of anger against this intruder, who had so unexpectedly appeared to claim her mother's place, stirred in her so that, for the moment, she found no answer ready to her hand.

"Who are you?" she cried at last. The woman's face changed consciously and a flush began to creep up in her cheeks.

"You should ask Luka Antonovitch to answer that," she said slowly. "Has he not told you that I am your mother who has come again?"

"But you are not my mother!" cried the girl with a vivid gesture of dissent. "My mother is dead and for two years has had her abiding place with God." The woman inclined her

head and signed herself with the sign of the cross.

“May He give her there for ever His full peace,” she said reverently. “But what does it matter, after all, whether I am Praskovia Egorovna or not? I am here in her place and her soul, at least, is so far in me that I have no thought but to be what she was both to Luka and to you.” She moved forward impulsively and put out her hand. “You will not hinder me in that?” she said appealingly. “Surely you will let me love you if I wish!” The girl shrank back before her advance and there was no responsive softening in her face.

“I do not know,” she said coldly. “There is no need for any one to come here in my mother’s place.”

“But if your father put me in her place—” broke in the woman eagerly.

“My father had no right! It is a wicked thing that he should so forget.” The woman’s brows drew momentarily together into a straight black line and she lifted her head proudly as if about to make vigorous answer to the charge. But there was sincere desire in her to make friends with the young girl, and,

setting her annoyance back, she spoke again, though with less calmness than before.

"Forget!" she cried. "Forget! Child, child, it was just because he did not forget that you find me with him here!"

"But why did you come?" persisted the girl. "You knew it was not true!" The woman's lip trembled and she drew in a long breath.

"Yes, I did know it," she admitted bravely. "But when he sought me, Luka Antonovitch did not know it, and I let myself be overborne." The girl's face grew more defiant and her eyes flashed as she ventured on reply.

"It was the more a wrong, then," she cried, "to take advantage of him when he could not know. Had you then no other place to go?" The woman's hands went up in protestation and she uttered an inarticulate cry.

"A thousand places! Yes," she said, "if at the end it had been a thing of choice. But I was no more free then in making up my mind than he was in the beginning in believing that in me Praskovia Egorovna had come to him again. When he first came to me with the story, I fought against him as I could. How he persuaded me I do not know. Perhaps God

willed it—or somewhere it was sealed of fate—I only know that I did not want to care,” she added softly. Her manner changed and she bent to the girl with a new note of eagerness in her voice. “Sara,” she said abruptly, “you love your father, do you not?”

“Yes,” said the girl tentatively.

“You know that when he went away it was in the belief that your mother was not dead, and that he must wander without peace till she returned to him?” The girl made no verbal answer, but nodded impatiently an assent.

“Well, when he found me, a change came in his delusion. He no longer thought that Praskovia Egorovna was lost, but believed that in me she had come to him again. That was the only reason that he turned to me and why his thought fixed on coming back here to Kussilof and the home he had left. That, too, was the problem I had to face—whether I should give up my life and go with him in your mother’s place and make possible for him once more the happiness God meant that he should have; or else, by refusal, shut him out of that life and leave him to go out hopelessly on his wanderings again.” She stopped and looked wistfully

around the cheerful room, letting her eyes rest in turn on the various home-like furnishings it contained.

"This is a pleasant place," she said tremulously, "and I know how dear to you your mother's memory and things must be. But do you not love your father well enough to make this sacrifice for his sake? Would not your mother herself wish it, if she knew?" Sara Lukievna was sufficiently her father's child to be slow in making up her mind.

"I do not know," she said after a deliberate pause. "I love my father and would do much to help him again to what he was, but it hurts me to think of another being in my mother's place." The woman was grateful even for this small softening, and her face lit as she caught the girl's more kindly tone.

"Try to think of it only in that way, then," she said eagerly. "I shall not wish in any sort to blot out your mother's image from your heart. Let yourself forget that side of it and remember only that from this time we are going to work together side by side to make your father happy in his life." She paused and waited for the girl to speak, but Sara Lukievna

maintained her silence and looked irresolutely down, so the other woman patiently took up the thread of her discourse again.

“Why should you care so much,” she said absently, “since his choosing of me did not give to me his love?” She stopped abruptly as if unconsciously her speech had outrun her intent; but, seeing the girl’s eyes raised to hers in curious inquiry, she went on hurriedly to make the matter plain.

“It was not I he sought,” she said sorrowfully. “It was not my image that was in his heart. I love your father, Sara, with all there is of me to give. I would work my fingers to the bone for him, and he could have my life tomorrow, if there came a need. But this pleasure of giving and serving is the only thing that has come to me in return. My coming to him did not bring to me the real joy of being wife—the bliss of being loved for myself alone!” Her voice broke and she looked away until she could steady it again.

“You understand?” she said tremulously. “It was never I, Lisa Fedorovna, to whom he turned. If he touched my hand, it was Praskovia Egorovna’s hand he felt in his. When

he looked into my eyes, it was not mine but your mother's soul he saw look back at him. Was there ever such a fate as mine!" she cried. "To be so near to happiness, to see, to agonize for it, and yet to know that the shadow must stand relentlessly between!" She forgot Sara Lukievna in the bitterness of her unhappiness and stood with her shoulders heaving and her eyes fixed unseeingly away.

The girl watched her with fascinated interest, and it was plain that her loyalty to her mother's memory was being shaken by the treacherous softness working in her heart. But there was another desire in her which was stronger than her sympathy and it was this which first put itself in speech.

"My father—" she burst out suddenly. "Does he still think you are my mother, or has he found out the truth?" Lisa Fedorovna was still so preoccupied with her thought that at first she did not seem to hear. But as the import of the question came fully home to her she turned again to the young girl and Sara Lukievna saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

"He knows it now," she said almost under her breath. "It came to him, after a time, so

that he understood." The girl burned with the desire to know what change this sudden retrieving into sanity had wrought in her father's love, but there was a reserve in Lisa Fedorovna's eyes which was almost challenge, and with the word unspoken she set it reluctantly aside.

"It must have been a dreadful thing," she said sympathetically. "How was it that it came about?" It was plain that Lisa Fedorovna had expected this question and dreaded it, for in spite of her effort at self-control, her hand went to her heart and she uttered a sharp little cry.

"Oh, it was dreadful—dreadful!" she said quickly. "So much so I can not bear to think about it even now!"

"Was it some sudden shock?" urged the girl breathlessly.

"Yes, yes, it was a shock." Lisa Fedorovna began to tremble with excitement, and manifestly found in the recollection such vivid pain that Sara Lukievna forgot her resentment, and moving forward impulsively she caught her sympathetically in her arms.

"And did he then love you when he came to

know?" she whispered. Lisa Fedorovna tried to appear unconcerned, but her lips were unsteady and her face set so convulsively that the girl saw that a struggle went on in her between her candor and her pride.

"It was not that alone," she said when she could control her voice. "That I am with him here shows that he cared enough, at least, so that he did not send me away." Sara Lukievna was not deceived by her sophistry.

"Then why are you so unhappy?" she demanded. For the moment Lisa Fedorovna did not answer, and before she did she reached out, and, putting her hands on either side of Sara Lukievna's head, she drew it down till the girl could not see her face.

"I can not tell you," she said softly. "There are some things so secret they can not be spoken of at all. God has set this one between your father and me, and between ourselves and Him alone the end of it must be worked out." She stopped abruptly, though she still held the girl pressed close against her breast. After a moment, however, she put her quietly away from her until she looked her squarely in the eyes. "What am I saying—"

she said deprecatingly, and bent to Sara Lukievna with as much of a smile as she could muster through her tears. "Surely, now that you know the truth about my coming here, you will not mind my staying?" she cried humbly, and put out her hands.

This time Sara Lukievna did not repulse her, and, having surrendered, gave herself up to the new condition with all the abandon that Lisa Fedorovna could have wished. The two women cried together for a space, and, when the storm was passed and quiet come again, Sara Lukievna took her new-found mother through the various rooms and showed her what her two years' stewardship had been.

Lisa Fedorovna was grateful that the child had so frankly accepted truce and bent herself eagerly to draw her into yet closer bonds. The girl warmed under her ministrations, like a plant set in the sun, and, listening to her ingenuous confidences and the infectious laughter of her voice, the older woman lost for the time the look of grave unhappiness which was the fixed expression of her face.

It was not till noon that the shadow settled over it again. Then, Sara Lukievna noticed

that her stepmother grew uneasy as the time approached for Luka Antonovitch's return.

"You must be patient with him, child," she said, "if he is moody or distraught. Only time can bring him wholly to what he was again." It was the older woman's eyes which were the first to see the man as he came along the way, but Sara Lukievna could not wait and ran to meet him when he was still some distance off. Luka Antonovitch was pleased with her eager impetuosity and put his arm around her shoulders as they walked along.

"You have been with Lisa," he said with a smile. "Are you then so glad to have her home?" The girl gave a swift sidewise glance up into his face before she answered him.

"Yes, I am glad that both of you have come," she answered bravely. Luka Antonovitch took her answer quite as a matter of course.

"She is a wonderful woman," he said simply. "It was good of her to come." He brightened notably during the short walk to the house and laughed with Sara Lukievna as light-heartedly as a boy. But he sobered as he reached it, and looking up at him suddenly the girl saw that his face had changed so that it

again wore the mask of apathy which she had noted upon it when she first met him at the door.

He greeted Lisa Fedorovna with civility, but, with no proffer of attention or caress, pushed by her and went into the house. The woman's face, as she stood to wait for him, had been a transparent mirror of her soul. She made no sign of complaint at his chary notice, but stood proudly where she was till he had disappeared within. Then with a smile that was pitiful in the unhappiness it strove to hide, she beckoned to the astonished girl and followed Luka Antonovitch into the house.

The shadow, whatever it was, lay darkly on both man and woman during the midday meal. Lisa Fedorovna waited on Luka Antonovitch with a submissive attentiveness which left no lapses in the service which she gave. The man accepted her ministrations without comment, but preserved the same stolidity, speaking occasionally, but for the most part remaining taciturn and grave. When he was done, he pushed back his chair without a word and, after bringing in some pieces of their baggage from outside and doing one or two other things about the

room, he took his hat and went out, setting his face toward the store building of the Company in which before he had had his work.

Sara Lukievna's first impulse was to follow him. She had had in mind all day to return to her other home and see what outcome there had been to her plan for Pavel Pavelovitch's surprise. But the pathetic desolateness of Lisa Fedorovna's figure, as she went listlessly about the house, touched the girl so that she felt ashamed to go away and leave her there alone. Then, too, it piqued her pride that neither of her foster parents had come to see what welfare for her her sudden change of home had brought, and there was an added touch of bitterness in the thought that their neglect was due in part, at least, to their blind absorption in their son.

Her wavering judgment found the convincing touch in the opening of the bundles which Luka Antonovitch had brought in. Absorbed in their examination the girl put off the intended visit and settled herself comfortably for the day.

But she could not get out of her mind the shadow which lay between the newly wedded pair. The remembrance of the constraint her

father had shown when he met Lisa Fedorovna at the door lingered, and it dawned upon her that while each alone had spoken of the other in terms of interest and love, as soon as they came together a barrier seemed to rise between them, which they had not the power or the inclination to beat down.

“They have quarreled,” she thought, and looked at Lisa Fedorovna with sympathetic eyes. But before the three parted for the night, a thing occurred which showed this theory wrong and gave the difference a more tragic note.

The long evening had worn slowly away, while the girl and the woman talked and Luka Antonovitch sat and listened as he smoked. As it grew late, Lisa Fedorovna became restless and, rising, set about making things ready for the night. The bedding was unrolled in an inner room and a final fagot crowded in the stove. When all was ready, she came to the young girl.

“It is time you were asleep,” she said. “Are you too old to like to have some one come to tuck you in?” Without waiting for an answer, she put her arm around Sara Lukievna’s shoul-

ders and went with her to the little room, scarcely more than an alcove, which had been hers since she was big enough to sleep alone. She talked to the girl softly till she was undressed, and then, bending down, laid her cheek lovingly against the cheek upon the pillow. Sara Lukievna wound her arms around her new mother's neck and drew her down to her as tightly as she could.

"I am glad you have come," she whispered. "I do not believe I shall so much grudge to you my mother's place." Lisa Fedorovna's head nestled responsively closer and she convulsively drew in her breath.

"God bless you!" she said brokenly. "Your heart is so tender, it hurts me to think you are not really my own." She held the girl for a heart-beat drawn down tight against her breast. Then as if fearful to stay longer, lest she should lose her self-control, she unwound Sara Lukievna's detaining arms and went hurriedly away.

She paused in the main apartment long enough to light and take up a lamp, after which the girl saw her go across and enter the sleeping-room beyond. Later, with the lamp left be-

hind, she appeared at the door and stood with her hand raised against the jamb.

“It is late, Luka,” she said timidly. “What are you going to do?” The man raised his head and looked at her, but beyond that made no sign. She watched him till she was sure he was not going to answer her, and then stepped forward a pace, a great pity showing in her eyes.

“Take heart!” she cried. “O Luka, I wish that I could be of help to you to-night!” The man threw up his hands in hopeless protest, rose from his seat and went slowly across the room.

She must have thought him about to claim her proffered aid, for at his first movement she went red and white and fixed her eyes on him with a fascination that was akin to fear. Then, as he began to come to her, her consternation grew so that she gave hastily back till she was again at the door, her breath coming fast and her eyes shining with an excitement she could not conceal.

Yet when he reached her he did not stop, but, pushing by her without a word, passed on into the inner room. A moment after, he returned

with a pile of bedding in his arms, and carrying it to the alcove room beyond the stove, proceeded to arrange a place there for himself. The woman watched his bent figure with a wistful tenderness. She followed the whole process of his bed-making with impatient eyes. When he was done and stood erect again, she could contain herself no longer, and with a wild burst of tears she ran to him and threw her arms about his neck.

"I love you," she cried in bitter anguish, "and yet it has only come to me to spoil your life! Surely, some day, God will take off the curse—"

"Hush," he cried sternly. "Even so, it is not for the child to hear!" With a repression that was more bitter to her in him than anger would have been, he disengaged himself and set her back from him. It was evident, though, that there was no quarrel between them, as Sara Lukievna had thought, for his arm went round her shoulders and he drew her with him across into the farther room.

"How do I dare take heart?" he said wearily. "What is done can not be undone and there is nothing gained by beating against the wall!"

They passed out of the range of Sara Lukievna's hearing, so that she could no longer clearly distinguish words. But still there came to her with depressing distinctness the woman's pleading voice, her stifled weeping and the colorless, persistent dejection of Luka Antonovitch's heavier tones. All the longing of the woman's soul was voiced in her eager cry: "Have courage, Luka! Oh, take heart!" and it spoke again and again out of the confusion of inarticulate sound until the listening girl got it poignantly on her nerves and cried in hearing it for very sympathy.

But in the end she found no certainty that Lisa Fedorovna brought to her father the uplift of which he seemed to be in need. For when the pleading ceased and Luka Antonovitch came out again, he was alone and seemed to have no thought beyond getting himself quickly to his rest. His face was pale and worn and he walked heavily as if he were deadly tired. He went at once to his place and laid himself heavily down and, once in, as if to shut the whole world from his life, drew up the covers clear above his head.

It was perhaps as well he did so, if he wished

to sleep, for Sara Lukievna, less protected where she lay, heard with disturbing regularity the movements and restless tossing of Lisa Fedorovna in her place and knew from her sobbing that, long into the night, her stepmother found no comfort and still kept vigil with her grief.

CHAPTER III

SARA MEETS WITH A CHECK

Suffering, like the drip of water on a stone, sets indelibly a mark of wear, and there was no one of the three dwellers in the house at the gate but showed next morning the strain which had been upon them in the night. Luka Antonovitch was moody and distraught. He broke his fast in silence and when the meal was finished, deserted promptly from the room.

Lisa Fedorovna, too, was heavy-eyed and languid in spite of her strong endeavor to look cheerfully on life. But Sara Lukievna was the most self-conscious of the three. She could not keep out of her face the depression which came to her from her unexpected participation in the others' cares, and she followed Lisa Fedorovna's listless movements, as she went about her work, with eyes which had in them a frank appeal for further confidences.

Her heart was very tender toward her new

mother in her distress, and besides, she found a burning interest in the mysterious trouble which lay between the newly wedded pair. So plainly did her thoughts show in her face that the older woman noticed and finally let her feelings into speech.

“Do you remember,” she began abruptly, “how bitter life seemed to you the day your father went away?” The girl did remember and made instant answer.

“It was the end of my world!” she declared positively.

“Then you understand, perhaps, how lonely it was for me last night, here in this house for the first time. Was it so very bad? Did I keep you awake long?” Sara Lukievna felt a twinge of shame, as if somehow it had been eavesdropping, that she had heard.

“I could not but hear,” she said apologetically. “And besides, I was so sorry that that alone would have served to keep me awake.” Lisa Fedorovna did not resume her work, but stood looking first at one hand and then at the other, as if in them she found something unexpected and absorbingly new.

“It is sweet indeed to have your sympathy,”

she said in a low voice, "but by what right can I claim it when I can not tell you why it should be given?" The girl was manifestly disappointed, but strove earnestly to appear unconcerned.

"It was a free gift," she said softly. "I had no thought in offering it of asking anything from you in return." Lisa Fedorovna's face flushed.

"Are you sure of that?" she cried.

"Yes. It would be no different if I knew." The woman's figure straightened and she lifted her head with a new strength.

"The kindness will not be misplaced," she said with a certain proud humility. "If you knew the whole, I think you would still take me by the hand. Sometime God will make clear the truth, but until then if you stand by my side it must be blindly and with no knowledge but that there is the need. It will not be so hard, though," she added apologetically. "After this, even if I am tempted, I promise you that I shall not give way to my loneliness again!" She turned as she finished speaking and resumed her work as if there had been no break. Sara Lukievna respected her reserve and, after

a moment of uncertain waiting, left her and stepped outside.

She went into the little garden which Vassili Balin had established in the sheltered plot to the south, between the house wall and the stockade. It was warm there in the clear spring sunshine, and she wandered aimlessly about, touching the flowers and absorbing from the complaisant friendliness of nature a tonic uplift which renewed again her youthful elasticity. It was impossible not to be cheerful with the sun so bland, and, as her imagination warmed, she forgot the depression of the night, and remembered only that life provided many amenities to offset the unpleasantness of its alarms, and that this mystery, which sat so heavily on her father and mother, was furnishing her now with many continued and interesting thrills.

So wrapped did she become in these speculations that, until he had passed, she did not see the priest who came in through the gate of the stockade and went by her on his way to the church building against the eastern wall. When she did see him, her fear of the evil eye, should he have seen her first, made her shrink suddenly into cover in the earnest hope

that she had not caught his glance. He made no recognition of her presence, however, and she crossed herself, as a further protection as she watched him out of sight. But his passing gave her an idea and she went back into the house.

“Father Damian has come. We shall have service to-day,” she said eagerly to Lisa Fedorovna.

“Who is Father Damian?”

“He is the priest who has charge of the three Inlet missions on this side. He goes from one to the other and is only here one week out of the four.” Lisa Fedorovna found no special interest in the announcement, but to Sara Lukievna the monthly service was a bright spot in her quiet life and something that was beyond her comprehension that any one should think to miss.

“You will see every one in the post,” she cried excitedly, “and they will every one want to see you. And I shall be proud of you!” she added breathlessly. Lisa Fedorovna did not seem greatly pleased at the prospect, though she smiled at the girl’s excitement and bent and kissed her on the lips.

“But what is there of interest besides the mass?” she asked. “I have seen services before.”

“The service itself is well done,” replied the girl loyally, “but for one thing, since the priest is come, Ledka Usova’s baby will be baptized to-day, and she is letting me hold the basket for her at the font.”

“That surely will be worth while,” returned the older woman with a smile. She let herself fall into the girl’s lighter mood and began to make the necessary changes in her dress. Sara Lukievna’s excitement grew, as she watched the preparations, and she urged them on, till Lisa Fedorovna took notice of her haste.

“Why do you hurry me so?” she said finally. “It is an hour yet, at least, before the service.”

“That is true,” returned the girl, “but with us, confession comes before the mass.” Lisa Fedorovna stopped with her dressing and turned to Sara Lukievna with disquiet in her face.

“But, surely,” she said with some constraint, “it is not necessary that one should always be confessed?”

“What is there to be gained by waiting? If you are not confessed, you can not take the

communion, and if you do not do that, Father Damian will notice it and come at once to find the reason why." Lisa Fedorovna's lips drew together and she stood considering the matter with half closed eyes.

"I think, after all, I shall not go," she said slowly. Sara Lukievna's face fell and she gave a little cry.

"Oh, do come!" she urged. "I do not want to leave you here alone."

"I shall not mind," returned Lisa Fedorovna. "And, after all, it is better that I should be here when Luka Antonovitch returns."

"But he will go to church, too."

"No, he will not," said Lisa Fedorovna quietly. "He will come home here to me." With sudden intuition the girl divined the reason for her companion's hesitation and when she spoke there was a significant echo of her suspicion in her voice.

"But you will have to go later, if not to-day," she said. "You can not stay outside the Church." Lisa Fedorovna turned on her fiercely, and there was the look of one who is hunted in her face. The glance, however, satisfied her that Sara Lukievna's suggestion had

been nothing but a guess, and she held reply until she had gathered her emotions safely into control. When she did speak it was with the full steadiness of self-restraint.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But to-day, at least, it would not be best that I should go.” Sara Lukievna’s anticipation of introducing her new mother to the congregation of the post had been stronger than she knew, and her disappointment in being deprived of the delight was great.

“Oh, well!” she said. “If that is the way you feel, I suppose you had better stay. But for me, I have promised Ledka Usova and I shall have to go.” She lingered, however, postponing the event, in the hope that Lisa Fedorovna would relent and change her mind. But the older woman remained steadfast in her purpose and, beyond a sorrowful reproach that looked out from her eyes, seemed to have dismissed the subject from her thought.

Seeing at last that her persuasion came but to deaf ears, Sara Lukievna gave up the effort and set out by herself. It did not increase her good humor to find that the time spent in argument with Lisa Fedorovna had made her late. When she entered the little room set apart for the

confession, it was already full of people, and she had to wait till the long line before her had received judgment for their whispered sins. —

Her own confession occupied small space, and when it was done, with a swift computation of the period necessary to clean the smirches from the skirts of those to follow her, she decided that there would be time for a visit to the house of her foster parents before the service should begin. Here again she met with disappointment, for the house was empty and not even Masha, the servant, there to give her news. She found abundant evidence of the arrival of Thoma Pavelovitch, and experienced the first satisfaction of the day in a surreptitious examination of his things.

She awoke from this delight with the guilty conviction that she had again overstayed her time. In a panic of contrition she hastened back to the church, only to find, as she had feared, that the service had begun. As she looked in from the vestibule, the priest and the deacon came out through the north part, preceded by the lamp, so she waited while they passed across and took up their station before the holy doors. Then when the deacon said:

“Let us beseech the Lord,” and the people began to kneel, she took advantage of the confusion to slip quietly through the crowd to her accustomed place near the steps of the altar on the north.

Here a small strip of carpet was commonly reserved for her use and that of Akoulina Fedosyevna. But this time, as she reached it, she saw to her dismay that it was already occupied by some one else. The intruder was a young man whom she had never before seen. This fact, together with his official dress, which was different from the clothing worn by the regular dwellers at the post, suggested to her at once that he was the son of the commandant for whose coming she had so excitedly prepared. Neither his father nor his mother was with him, and he was kneeling on the very center of the carpet with the evident expectation of occupying it alone.

Sara Lukievna paused irresolutely, uncertain what to do. She looked about for a convenient station, but saw none except where the floor was bare. The last of the worshipers was sinking to his knees and there was no time for further choice. A panic seized her lest

she be left standing there alone, and with the aggressive assumption of one who makes a virtue of a right, she plumped suddenly down at the stranger's side, appropriating to herself as much as might be of her usual place.

The space was so narrow that unavoidably she crowded close against his arm. The young man turned with startled haste at the unexpected interruption, and with a smothered ejaculation of apology edged promptly over to one side. Sara Lukievna kept her eyes fixed demurely on the floor, but it was within the limit of her vision that the stranger remained uncomfortably conscious of her presence and flushed so furiously that even his ears grew red.

"He is not so bad!" she said to herself. She noted his trim figure and the careful precision of his dress. Between them on the carpet, she discovered a square of white cloth, which with a mischievous little thrill she recognized as a handkerchief which he had spread out as a further protection to his knees.

Living in the family of his father, the girl's mind had been so steeped in the details of Thoma Pavelovitch's return, and, further, she had been regaled by Akoulina Fedosyevna with

such minute accounts of his appearance and intimate characteristics, that, in finding him thus beside her, she felt no strangeness in the situation, but inclined to him frankly as to an accepted friend.

From his side, however, Thoma Pavelovitch lacked the advantage of like precedents and viewed the girl's advances with uneasy mind. He remained stiffly in his place until the prayer was ended and then got quickly to his feet. His impulse was to move to some less contested spot, but before he could put his intention into act, Sara Lukievna divined it and brought him promptly to a pause.

"Oh, do not go," she whispered. "Unless you insist on having the middle, the carpet is quite big enough for two." The unexpectedness of the attack disconcerted the young man and he grew redder than before.

"I will remain," he answered hurriedly. "I was told that this was my mother's place." Sara Lukievna looked up at him reassuringly, but he had fixed his glance steadfastly on the altar and would not allow himself to be put at ease. She continued to turn on him her sympathetic glances from time to time, but he

persisted in remaining oblivious to her presence, and so long as the service lasted she was obliged to limit her ministrations to an air of friendly appropriation and an occasional reassuring look. But when it was done and the crucifix was kissed, she turned to him promptly and put out both her hands.

"You are Thoma Kolomin," she cried impulsively. "I knew it must be you as soon as I saw you in the church!" The young man received the greeting awkwardly and only by an effort brought himself to touch the fingers she held out.

"My name is Thoma Kolomin," he said with a stiffness which had in it a distinct reserve, "but it would perhaps be less strange to me that you should know it if I were more certain who you are."

"Of course," she answered, a twinkle of amusement dancing in her eyes. "I knew who you were and it never occurred to me that you would not know about me. I am Sara Lukievna, who has had your place in your family while you have been away." The young man's face cleared and he began to seem more at his ease.

"I remember now," he said in his slow speech. "My mother has spoken to me of you in her letters from time to time."

"But that is not enough," returned the girl protestingly. "Considering that I have had your place in the family you should have remembered more than that. Your mother, now, has told me very many things about you, and I promise you that I have not forgotten one. I could tell you when you were born, how many teeth you had when you were two years old, and how long you wore your hair in a circle before they gave up cutting it under a bowl. But there was one thing though, that she forgot to tell me, and that is that you are shy."

Thoma Pavelovitch had honest eyes, but as he tried to collect himself for answer the only thing they showed him of her face was a blur of white within a halo of encircling red. He hated himself for being disconcerted, the more so because it was certain that the girl before him had no thought to be unkind.

"I have been a long time away," he said apologetically. "Perhaps after I have been here a while I shall more decently remember the things I ought to know."

"Oh, but it is interesting as it is," broke in the girl impulsively. "If I had known beforehand that you would not know me, I should have spoken to you just the same."

"No doubt!" he said a little dryly. "And being with my mother it will probably not be long before I shall receive from her full information about you." He bowed formally as he spoke and stepped back with the evident intention of getting himself away. But Sara Lukievna was too frankly pleased with his society so easily to give it up.

"Why do you not stay?" she said. "I was at your house just before the service began and there was no one there."

"That is true," he answered. "Instead of going to church my father and mother went to visit one of his officers here who has just acquired a new wife." The girl gave an exclamation of surprise.

"It was my father and mother, then, that they went to see. I wish I had been at home!" It was Thoma Pavelovitch's turn to be surprised.

"But you are not Luka Strukof's daughter?" he said abruptly. There was something in his

tone that made the girl look up at him inquiringly.

"Yes, I am Luka Strukof's daughter," she said steadily. "Why do you ask?" The man's ready flush of embarrassment stirred in his cheeks and he hesitated before he ventured a reply.

"I was simply curious," he said finally, "because we had your father and mother with us on the boat." His answer did not turn aside the girl's suspicion and she kept her glance fixed on him narrowly, as if hoping in some way to surprise from him his ulterior intent. Her loyalty to her father, however, kept her from disclosing even in the smallest degree the fears that were in her mind, and she shut her lips tightly on the question she wished most to ask. One inquiry, however, she felt she might put without attracting to herself undue remark.

"You came with them all the way?" she asked.

"No. They boarded the ship at Kadiak, though I understand that they were but just arrived from farther west."

"Of course," said the girl, as if she had known this all the time. She had hoped to hear

from what place her new mother had been brought, and her disappointment in not learning it was tempered only by the fact that in the commandant's son she had found a source of information which later could be worked. The young man saw that the church was growing empty and made the matter an excuse.

"Shall we not go?" he said with an inclination of his head in the direction of the door. "Almost all the others have gone out." The girl's hands came suddenly together and she gave a little shriek of dismay.

"Where is my baby?" she cried. "Surely Ledka Usova could not have forgotten!" She looked wildly around the church for a moment and then settled on a figure near the doorway with a flutter of relief.

"Oh, there she is!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "We might as well wait here, then, until the priest arrives." The young man followed her rapid movements with bewilderment.

"But it is not your child!" he said in astonishment. She looked up at him with mischief in her eyes.

"It does not appear as though it could be, does it?" she said demurely. "I suppose I

must seem very young.” He looked at her with suspicious eyes.

“I am afraid I am no judge of such matters,” he said curtly, “and in this case my mother wrote me nothing of the truth.” There was a distinct edge of annoyance in his tone and Sara Lukievna set herself to make amends.

“No, I am not married,” she said humbly. “The baby belongs to Ledka Usova, the woman who is holding it there by the door. I call it mine, though, because she lets me take care of it, as if it really were. Are you fond of babies?” she added, turning up to him suddenly the full battery of her dark eyes. She did not wait for him to answer, but went on as if she were taking the words directly from his mouth.

“Of course you are not,” she said. “How could you be, when you have been so long away in schools where they never have any of the proper size?” The sacristan came out with a bucket of water which he poured leisurely into the font, testing it with his fingers to see that it was not too warm.

“It is to be a christening,” said Sara Lukievna, dropping her voice. “At least, it is to be the baptism part of a christening. You see

Ledka Usova is poor and has only two shifts for the child to wear. I wanted to give her more but she was too proud to let me, so we have had to do only a part of the christening each Sunday and divide the ceremony into four. Six weeks ago Father Damian renounced the child and blew out the devils for us, and the last time there was church he anointed him with holy oil. To-day they will put him through the water and three weeks from now they will finish and take him up through the royal gates. You see in that way we do not have to undress him more than twice in one service and can make the two shifts do very well. He ought to be finished, though, to-day," she added regretfully. "He is growing so fast that in another three weeks he will never get into those he has now unless I let out the seams."

"Are you acting as sponsor, then?" he asked.

"No, but your father is. He has to promise for half the babies of the post. I am to carry the basket with the things, and— Oh, you will want to see that basket, for in the beginning it was yours. Your mother lent it to me for this christening, because it was my baby, and it has

the same lace and bows on it that it had when it was carried up for you." It was plain that the young man did not take altogether kindly to these reminiscences of the past.

"You have the advantage of me in recognizing it," he said stiffly. "My memory scarcely carries me back as far as that."

"Come and see it, then," she cried gaily. "I assure you it is no common one at all." There was something compelling in her assumption that he would do as she wished, and he followed her meekly across the church to where the woman with the baby stood.

"Ledka," she said, "this is Thoma Kolomin, Pavel Pavelovitch's son. He is very much interested in the baby and wants to see the basket, which you know used to be his. You would not think, would you, that it ever held his clothes while the priest dipped him through the water by the legs!" The woman looked Thoma Pavelovitch over and her mouth widened into an appreciative grin.

"God did not stunt him, surely," she said. "It would be easier to put the basket in his clothing now." As before when Sara Lukievna had teased him, the young man's face again

grew violently red, and she was moved to further audacities as she saw. Taking the child from its pillow in the mother's arms, she held it up before his face.

"This is Sasha," she said. "That is, he will be Sasha when the christening is done. Lift him and see how heavy he is for three months." The young man's hands went instinctively behind him and he looked so uncomfortable that the girl laughed outright.

"He would not hurt you!" she cried with a mischievous wrinkling of her nose. Then, seeing that the priest had come out and was waiting at the font, she turned and put the child back in its mother's arms.

"There is Father Damian and the water is in the font," she said. "Why do you not go forward?"

"Pavel Pavelovitch is not here," returned the woman doubtfully.

"Where are the others?"

"Just outside the door." The girl drew her brows together in a frown.

"That is too bad," she said warningly. "You know Father Damian does not like to wait."

“I know it, but what can we do when there is no one else?” The girl’s eyes wandered about the church, as if in search of the missing sponsor, and came back at last to the young man at her side.

“Why, of course!” she said with a sudden inspiration. “Ledka, here is Thoma Pavelovitch. Why should not he be sponsor in his father’s place?”

“Oh, no!” broke in the young man protestingly. Sara Lukievna vouchsafed him no answer beyond a warning lift of her hand, and turned her attention to Ledka Usova, who was looking at the unexpected candidate with symptoms of alarm.

“I know he is somewhat young, Ledka,” she said deprecatingly. “But he comes well recommended, and if the number of sponsors is correct, I do not see why Father Damian should stand for a particular one.” She went to Thoma Pavelovitch and put out her hand. “You will do it for us, will you not?” she said coaxingly. “You will only be helping your father out, and if the baptism goes over for an extra three weeks I shall have to make Sasha an entirely new set of clothes!” Some glimpse

of the humor of the thing came to the young man and his face relaxed into a smile.

"I have never done anything of the sort," he said feebly.

"Do not worry about that," cried the girl reassuringly. "All you have to do is to walk around with the procession and pretend to answer like the rest." She rushed to the door and brought in the remainder of the party, and, gathering them all together, convoyed them safely to their proper place before the font.

Beyond a single searching glance in the direction of Thoma Pavelovitch, the priest paid no attention to his presence and did not seem to notice that the sponsors had been changed. Sara Lukievna fairly trembled with excitement, as she held the basket by Ledka Usova's side. She was fully occupied through the investiture and the penciling with myrrh, but as they marched round the font she contrived to come near to Thoma Pavelovitch and between her alleluias to make hurried speech.

"A barefoot saint could not do better," she whispered. "You will march quite as well as your father when you get to be as old." Before the end of the final prayer, Thoma Pavelovitch

saw his father come guiltily into the church, and immediately on the close of the petition he slipped away from his companions and joined him at the door.

“Come away before they get me into anything more,” he said hurriedly. The elder man’s eyes twinkled, and he submitted without a word to be led outside.

“You found Sara, then?” he said quizzically. The young man grunted and lifted up his lip.

“Yes, I found her,” he said grimly, “and she has put me through my paces till, like the baby in yonder, I feel as if I was a ‘newly illumined servant of God.’” The old man laughed silently and put his hand soothingly on the other’s arm.

“I thought it was one of her pranks when I saw you at the font,” he said amusedly. “Well, well! For all that, she is a good girl, Thoma, and will make some man a splendid wife.”

“She would never do for me,” burst out the young man contemptuously. “There is no appeal for me in women of that kind.” Pavel Pavelovitch was highly entertained.

“Bless me, how very positive we are!” he said cheerfully. “Why, when I was your age,

almost anything that wore a kuntush was good enough for me. I will say this to you, though, my son. If you feel like that about Sara Lukievna, take good care not to let her get the notion that you are worth her while. For if ever she makes up her mind she wants you, from that moment you might as well throw up your hands."

"She will never have the chance," returned the young man heatedly, and again his father laughed. They went on in silence, the older man making inventory with enjoyment of the items of the younger's ruffled self-esteem. His relation to Thoma Pavelovitch privileged him to question, and he took advantage of it to reopen the subject as if there had been no break.

"It is strange we have not noticed these faults in Sara Lukievna," he said with well-assumed seriousness. "What is it in her you do not like?" The son shrugged his shoulders and waited a moment before speaking, as if weighing the matter judicially in his mind.

"It is not so far to seek," he said loftily. "She talks so much one has not time to think. I like a quiet woman in the house. She has good points, too, I suppose, when one has time to find

them out, but as I have seen her only once it is too soon to judge. But she was forward, I thought, to-day, and she made me nervous, and—well, if it comes down to it—her hair, for one thing, is too red.”

CHAPTER IV

LUKA RECEIVES ADVICE

Thoma Kolomin fitted himself readily into the groove already established for him by his father's position and prestige, and passed as by right into the good graces of the dwellers in the place.

He was a man's man rather than a woman's, and wasted small time on the feminine portion of the post. Sara Lukievna and his mother would not be denied. But women did not hold his attention and, setting them to one side, he plunged into his father's work with a zest which identified him promptly with the life about him, and raised between him and curiosity the sheltering screen of a close familiarity. He and Pavel Pavelovitch became inseparable companions, and the old man grew so elated with pride in and admiration of his son that there sat on him perpetually the complacent mantle of his new importance.

“We will show Konovalof now,” he said with a contemptuous backward uplift of his head. “Let him build himself a blockhouse, if he will!”

But Luka Strukof and his wife did not slip so quickly from the public gaze. Either because they continued to remember the strange possession which had held the man when he went away, and so kept interest to see how far the new wife proved a consolation for the old, or else because they scented finally some flavor of the secret which lay hidden in the couple's lives, the gossips of the post kept them both in memory and experienced thrills of curiosity concerning them, long after Thoma Pavelovitch and his coming had passed as an interest from their minds.

Not that the conduct of the two was such as to kindle suspicion into flame. Outwardly, their relations with each other were beyond reproach. Than Luka Strukof, no man in public could have been more devoted to his wife, and Lisa Fedorovna's cheeks flushed happily under his kindnesses, even when she knew the purpose for which the attentions were assumed. If in private he was less assiduous in his devotion,

no one knew of it but Sara Lukievna, and she took counsel of her pride and did not tell.

But bad news travels without vehicle of words, and in some unestablished way the impression deepened gradually into conviction with the lookers-on that all was not as it should be with the dwellers in the house at the gate. Much of this belief no doubt came from the hostile comment of the priest. Both Luka Antonovitch and his wife braved public opinion from the first and remained away from church. Persuasion and reproof on the part of the cleric brought each a like result, and the fact that Luka Antonovitch paid all the required fees, as if he had been proper in the rest, did not deter the discomfited churchman from holding up privately his disapproving hands.

"If he is not a heretic, he must be worse," he said, and repeated the charge so often that his flock remembered, and found themselves looking at the culprit with eyes that had in them much of the original bias of the priest's black look.

It did not help the case, either, that both Luka Antonovitch and Lisa Fedorovna found but light interest in the doings of the post. In so

small a place, there was of necessity a close communion in the daily life. In this, by right of prior entry, Luka Strukof already had a part, and without question the hand of fellowship went out equally to the strange woman who had come to stand by his side. The men admired her boldly and the women brought her kindly greetings, their desire to be friendly shining in their eyes.

At the beginning, both man and woman met these advances with an almost feverish return in kind. But as the days lengthened into weeks and the weeks into months, it dawned on the little community that the harvest they were reaping was somewhat disproportionate to the seed which they had sown. Neither Luka Antonovitch nor Lisa Fedorovna made failure in the letter of the law. In public duties and in private formalities they were conscientious to the last degree. But at the end of these, no man could say that he stood closer than at the beginning within the line of their reserve; and it was plain to watchful eyes that, for the real intimacies of life, the pair were sufficient unto themselves and remained voluntarily apart.

This once established, it was not far to the

conclusion, that, even between themselves, the husband and wife failed of complete accord. Luka Antonovitch's bent shoulders and tired face were not the symbols of a contented mind, and, when set off against the defiant misery which looked out of Lisa Fedorovna's eyes, these things became eloquent proclaimers of the discord which had given them birth.

"A black cat has run between them," said Akoulina Fedosyevna sagely. "God grant they may not have to wait to come together again until a child is born."

Curiously enough, the censure for the difference fell mostly on the wife. Luka Antonovitch went each morning to his work, and his patient unhappiness, as he bent above his desk, might publicly be shared in by all who went in and out through the great barrack hall. But Lisa Fedorovna's life was more private and apart, and so more open to be misunderstood. Less mercifully preoccupied by her tasks in the house at the gate she found the hours indoors intolerably long. Sara Lukievna was patient to a fault and offered steadily such consolation as her stepmother would permit. But with the consciousness between them of a secret never

to be shared, their communion failed pathetically to bring them into close accord, and with growing frequency the older woman found the mood seize her, when it was beyond her strength to remain with the girl, or with any one, between four walls.

And so it happened that more and more, as opportunity could be made, Lisa Fedorovna fled from the house out into the open where she could be alone. The fierce unrest within her carried her over the beaten trails for miles about the post, and she spent hours on the bluff behind the town, which commanded the narrow river, the sweep of the blue Inlet, and the majestic line of volcanoes in the low plain beyond.

There was no one else with interest to frequent this vantage of high ground, and it came as unnatural to the people of the post to see her lonely figure silhouetted there against the northern sky. At first the vision brought with it simply the curiosity that finds expression in remark. But, seen at strange seasons and day after day, her very aloofness took on a sinister significance, so that the feeling hardened into something perilously kindred to dislike.

“If she would hold her husband, why does

she not stay at home?" they said. "It is the smell of smoke that keeps love in the house."

Pavel Kolomin felt the suggestion, like the rest, and watched its spread among his people with concern. He was fond of Luka Strukof and from the first had experienced a pleasing sense of satisfaction in the presence near him of the man's splendid and stately wife. It disturbed him, therefore, to see trouble between the two, much as if it had been his own. Nor did it add to his peace that when he spoke to Thoma Pavelovitch about the matter he found him reticent upon the point. He listened to the young man's guarded answers with a curiosity which had in it a growing resentment that they offered so little that was tangible as to the grounds of his dislike.

"What have you got against the man?" he asked finally. "Surely you are not superstitious about him, and I can not see how he can have given you personal affront." Thoma Pavelovitch smiled at his father's vehemence, and rubbed his hand into his beard before he spoke.

"No," he said in his deliberate way, "there is no personal grudge. I must admit that the

man does not attract me, but it is not because he prefers his own society or does not seem to like his wife." The commandant's face remained clouded, and he pursed up his lips as he wrestled with the thought.

"What is it, then?" he demanded. "You must have some reason for the dislike." Again the young man was deliberate in his answer, and seemed to be searching in his mind for the full truth.

"How about his loyalty?" he suggested. "Are you sure that his interest is here rather than on the other side?" The commandant turned on his son with a new and startled interest.

"Why do you ask that?" he said abruptly. "I have trusted him completely and up to the time of your coming he was my most confidential man."

"That is true. But what if something—my taking his place with you, for instance—should have changed his heart?"

"It could not!" burst out the commandant excitedly. "Certainly you have seen nothing to bring the suggestion that it had."

"Nothing that was sure. My distrust of him

dates back to the time when I was with him on the boat. I went to him at once, when I found that he was from here, but he would have none of me, and kept me at arm's length, as if he had some secret he was afraid I should find out. There were strange stories, too, afloat about him among the crew, though nothing certain or distinct, and all the voyage he kept away from our men, and herded with the hunters from the Kenai post."

The commandant listened attentively, though it was plain he was reluctant to be convinced.

"It is something else," he maintained stoutly. "Even if he meditated treason then, he is here under my eye all day long, and has no chance, even if he sought one, to dicker with our friends across the stream." The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"But how about his wife?" he asked quietly. "She is out in the open all times of the day, and could carry a hundred messages for him, if she so desired. Perhaps it is she who is disaffected, and he can not hold her down; or the whole trouble between them may be assumed, so that the wife can get a better chance to be outside." But Pavel Kolomin remained loyal to his

friendship, and refused to admit the matter further to his mind.

“Pshaw! that is nonsense!” he broke in stubbornly. “You will have me in the plotting next, because I have been associating daily with the man. I do not believe a word of it.” Thoma Pavelovitch did not gainsay him, and let the matter drop. But the imputation remained and rankled in his father’s mind, until his caution as an officer took arms against his feelings as a man, and he came back with the matter soberly to his son.

“I know that I shall find that I am right,” he said defiantly; “but the house at the gate commands the entrance to the stockade, and it would be foolish to neglect a single possibility. I shall make it my business to talk with Luka Strukof, and probe this matter to its truth.”

He had only to wait till morning to find the opportunity he sought. It was his custom to go out early on his inspection round, returning later to the barrack to receive from Luka Strukof the reports on the day just past. Coming on him thus, a little before noon, he found him seated at his office table fast asleep. The reports were all made out and ready, and lay

before him in methodical little piles. But his arms were on the boards in front of him, and his head was dropped in such complete abandon that he did not hear the commandant as he came in.

Pavel Kolomin came forward to the table and paused beside the sleeper with a smile. His first thought was to go away and leave him to his nap. But as he turned to put his action into deed, he saw that which made him pause and bend curiously down above the sleeping man.

Luka Antonovitch's head was resting on his hands and his long hair had fallen forward until it hid all vision of his face. The unaccustomed position had disarranged his locks from the order in which they commonly lay, and in the uncovered space on the right side of his head there showed unexpectedly in view a fresh-healed, livid scar.

It was so ugly a wound and so unexpected in the finding, that the commandant, in stooping to examine it, gave an involuntary exclamation of surprise. The interruption, so near to his ear, went to the sleeper's consciousness as the more familiar sound had failed to do, and he sat suddenly upright. His eyes were wide with

sleep, and he stared at Pavel Kolomin with a confusion which, when he saw who it was that had awakened him, changed to a look of evident fear. He was so genuinely alarmed that the commandant spoke at once to put him at his ease.

“What is it, man?” he asked smilingly. “You must have had bad dreams.” Luka Antonovitch did not speak and kept his eyes fixed watchfully on his interlocutor, though he nodded his head slightly as if in answer to the question asked. His hand went cautiously to his head, and feeling that the scar was bare, he drew the hair hastily across it, while a flood of color rose to his face and mounted to his eyes. His manner was so strange and he was so palpably disturbed, that Pavel Kolomin felt the suspicion stir in him that perhaps, after all, the man had something to conceal.

“What is it that is on your mind?” he said bluntly. “You look as if you had seen a ghost.” Luka Antonovitch’s face went suddenly white and he drew in a gasping breath.

“Perhaps I have,” he said softly, and let his eyes go down hurriedly to the ground. Then, feeling the suspicion in the other’s manner, he

pulled himself together and looked the commandant squarely in the eyes.

"Pavel Pavelovitch," he said appealingly, "I have always been honest with you, have I not?"

"Yes," said the commandant laconically.

"Then you will believe me when I say to you that there is a matter which is weighing on my mind, but that it is not a thing that I can tell to you." The commandant's eyes fixed themselves on him searchingly, and his face grew grave.

"Why not?" he said curtly.

"Because the secret belongs to others besides myself." Pavel Kolomin drew down his brows and considered silently before he spoke.

"Your wife, I suppose, is one of the others," he said when he had thought the matter out. Again Luka Strukof's head went down.

"Yes," he admitted reluctantly.

"And that is the reason that you and your wife do not agree?" The color came back to Luka Strukof's face with a rush, and he half started to his feet.

"Is it so plain as that?" he cried. "Why did you not tell me that you saw!" The com-

mandant hesitated for a moment, and then with a kindly shrug came forward and put his hand on the shoulder of the excited man.

“My friend,” he said gently, “I do not know your secret, and if you choose to keep the matter from me, I do not wish to know. It touches me, though, that you and I, who have stood together through so many troubles, should find one here at last which we can not share. I should like to help you with it if I can, but if not, the secret is your own until you choose to tell. There is but one point on which I wish assurance, and that is that through this reserve of yours there threatens no treason to me or to the post.” Luka Strukof’s face cleared and he raised it to the commandant with the honesty of a child.

“I have never been disloyal to you in anything, Pavel Pavelovitch,” he said simply. “I would cut my hand off for you, if there was the need.”

“And your wife,” persisted the commandant. “Are you equally sure that she is having no dealings with the people on the other side?” It was evident without words that the question came as a surprise to the man addressed, for

his eyes opened with astonishment, and he stood looking at the commandant with parted lips.

"Lisa?" he cried with a half incredulous laugh. "Lisa!" Then as suddenly his face sobered, and he answered the inquiry as if there had been no break.

"My wife's honor is as near to me as my skin," he said proudly. "And I take the same care that it shall not be hurt." The commandant took away his hand, and stepped quietly back.

"That is enough," he said. "I did not really think that it was touched." Then with the air of definitely dismissing the subject from his mind he lifted his eyes to the scar on Luka Antonovitch's head.

"That is a bad cut you have there," he said irrelevantly. "I do not remember that you had it when you went away." A gleam of the old anxiety flickered up in Luka Antonovitch's eyes.

"It was a fall," he said, forcing himself to speak slowly and with distinctness. "It happened while I was on the other side." The commandant saw his chance to bring the conversation round to a point that he had wished.

“That was bad luck,” he said, “but at least it brought to you the chance to get good nursing from your wife.” Luka Strukof flashed a quick glance that showed that he suspected the ulterior motive in the other’s words, but he was not afraid to approach the subject, and answered him at once.

“It was to the holding of my life,” he said earnestly. “Without her nursing I should not now be here.”

“And yet,” said the commandant with a narrowing of his eyes, “after all that, you let a difference come between you, so that you walk apart, and let yourselves lose the comfort God meant for you as man and wife.” Luka Antonovitch’s face remained a mask, but his melancholy eyes fixed themselves on his tormentor in dumb appeal that he would let the matter pass. But Pavel Kolomin was blind to his desire, and went quickly on.

“It is a thankless task to give advice where none is asked,” he said. “But there are some things a friend ought to do for another, no matter how much they stand to hurt. I do not know what the trouble is between you and your wife, but I want to urge you that, for your own

sake, without delay you try to make it up. There is not overmuch of happiness for the best of us in life, and out here on the edge of things there is so much more of heartbreak in our bitter grind, that no man can afford to miss the smallest chance of happiness that may be his. You have a chance of happiness there, if you will take it, and it is not common-sense to let it go. If the fault has been yours, put your pride in your pocket, and go to Lisa Fedorovna and tell her you were wrong. If it is hers, humble yourself and refuse to be turned aside, if she gives you a sharp word. She loves you, man, I have seen it in her eyes. The heaven she can open to you is worth all else that can come to you in life. You have taken her from others and closed the door behind her on the world she had before. Now be a man, and show her that you propose to make for her another just as good."

He paused for lack of breath, and stood looking at Luka Antonovitch, to see what effect his counsel had produced. The latter sat stiffly upright, as he had been when the commandant began, except that before the speech was over his face had settled into its look of habitual

weariness, and he gripped the sides of the table with his hands.

“Well?” said the commandant at last. With a sudden motion Luka Antonovitch brought his eyes to those of his questioner, and sorrowfully shook his head.

“I can not! I can not!” he broke out passionately. “God knows it is not written within my right!” His eyes continued to hold those of the commandant in almost defiant challenge, and the latter, after a moment’s steady meeting of the glance, gave up the contest and turned aside with a sigh.

“Well, I suppose you are the best judge of that,” he said absently. He straightened his cap and coming forward put his hand kindly on Luka Strukof’s arm.

“Think it over, man,” he said with a little coaxing smile. Then with a nod, and a final friendly pressure of the arm he had held, he went out and left his companion there alone. For some time after the going of the commandant Luka Strukof remained rigidly in his place, his eyes fixed on vacancy, as if he neither saw nor heard. Then, with a shake of his head and a bitter out-sending of his breath, he came back

to himself, and, gathering up his papers, he set them away, and passed out in turn through the open barrack door, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and turning his feet with the unconsciousness of habit into the familiar path which led to the house at the gate.

His preoccupation, when he reached the house, had as yet granted him no sanction to act upon the commandant's advice. But this side of decision he found ample room for thought and, when he met his wife, it was with the uncomfortable feeling stirring in his heart that perhaps there had really been something in his treatment of her which called for definite amends.

Sara Lukievna had gone to her foster parents for the day, and Lisa Fedorovna was at home alone. The attitude of constraint was so usual a one between her and Luka Antonovitch, that she noticed nothing different in his manner when she first met him at the door. But his thought was too closely on her to admit of his interest remaining hid, and before the noonday meal was over she became conscious that she was more than usually in his regard, and that his eyes were constantly following her in secret

question at the times when he thought she did not see.

Showing thus unexpectedly out of the desert of his habitual indifference, his interest brought her for the moment a blissful warming at the heart. But as the meal approached its close, and the manifestation failed to grow into attention more intimate or frank, her pleasure faded into a sinking at the heart, and she found herself watching him, in turn, with an absorption that moved her to a certain sick dismay.

She fought against this possession that he should not see, but in spite of the effort she grew awkward and self-conscious, and in measure with her nervousness her manner became more and more constrained. He realized at last that she was troubled by his insistence and a wave of tenderness swept over him, which lifted his courage to the point of surer sight.

He delayed the explanation, however, till the meal was finished and it was time for him to go. Then he went to her, with an air of conscious embarrassment, and awkwardly put out his hands. She lifted hers to meet them almost unconsciously, and her eyes centered themselves with uncertain query on his face.

“It is nothing bad,” he said gently, “I want to lessen your unhappiness, not add to it. I have been thinking of you this morning, there in the barrack, and it has come to me that perhaps I have not been as thoughtful always toward you as I should.” It was the first time he had softened into any demonstration of affection, and she flushed furiously in the suddenness of her surprise.

“Oh no, no!” she cried almost under her breath. “You have been good to me. What further could I ask?”

“Perhaps much,” he persisted, following the thought that Pavel Kolomin had just put into his head. “I took you away from everything you had in life, and what am I doing toward making for you a new happiness here?”

“Hush!” she said warningly. “It is neither with you nor me to order our happiness!”

“I know,” he answered doggedly; “but God Himself would surely say that I should see that there came to you the full meed of comfort He allows. I want to help!” he cried. “Tell me what I can do to make the cup less bitter as you drink.” She smiled at him, but sorrowfully shook her head.

“There is nothing to be done,” she said. Her tone had in it all the hopelessness of her conviction, but she looked at him with such wistful suggestiveness that he refused to accept her answer as a final word.

“There is a way,” he cried triumphantly, “I see it in your face.” She kept her eyes fixed bravely on him, though the tears stood in them so she could scarcely see.

“It may be,” she said tremulously. “But I can not tell you what it is, Luka, if you do not see it for yourself.” He stood looking at her perplexedly while he turned the matter over in his mind.

“Oh, you are blind!” she cried with a sudden fierce impatience, and, snatching her hands from his, she left him standing and ran abruptly into the inner room.

CHAPTER V

LISA'S FORTUNE

Thoma Kolomin's irritation at Sara Lukievna had but a passing life. The change, however, did not come because of any sudden parting of the veil before his eyes. On the contrary, so far as a recognition of her virtues was concerned, he continued for a long time to see her through it as dimly as at first, and there persisted for him steadily the feeling of uneasiness as to her purposes which kept him watchful lest he should find her exploiting him further for her pleasure, as she had done on that first day in the church. But the very need of keeping on his guard gave her a distinction in his mind above the other women of the post, so that at least she remained with him as something of which he must warily take account.

Sara Lukievna, for her part, gave him no serious reason for alarm. She could not but be aware of his trepidation, for Pavel Kolomin

had lost no time in telling her of the primal impression she had made. But she was too interested in the young man for his family's sake to wish to have him hold her at arm's length, and when her mischief tempted her she regretfully suppressed it, so that he seldom saw more of it than the longing desire for it that looked out from her eyes.

She met him as frankly as a sister might, and though she was jealously assertive in seeing that he did not push her from her place in the hearts of the commandant and his wife, yet she recognized his claim to a proper share of the family regard, and yielded to him gracefully a generous part. It was easier for both that from the time of the young man's home-coming she was obliged to relinquish her residence with her foster parents and return to her father's house. But there was scarcely a day that she was not back in her more familiar haunts, and hearing her lively chatter and seeing her thus constantly about, Thoma Kolomin grew as unconsciously to the acceptance of her as he did to the presence of the more stereotyped furnishings of the place. Akoulina Fedosyevna made no difference between them in her regard and

assumed, as a matter of course, that toward herself and toward each other they would show the usual claim of common blood.

"You owe Sara much," she said to her son; "she has kept your place in the nest warm for you while you were outside learning to use your wings."

"I have not slighted her," he answered, "and unless she demands more than she does now, there is no doubt but we shall come on in peace."

But it was a matter of interest to him that the girl should have been able to creep so far into his parents' hearts and he studied her, closely if quietly, to make sure for himself wherein her power of fascination lay. That she was pretty, he made no effort to deny. Her dark eyes gave a steadying touch to her warm hair and brilliant complexion, and when she opened them widely, as she had a habit of doing as her interest grew, there showed in them such a blaze of varying and significant expression, that he found himself giving his attention to it, as much as he did to the words that came out from her lips.

Perhaps her most charming characteristic

lay in the child-like lightness of spirit with which she approached the difficult things of life. But not being able always to follow her readily in these excursions, the young man continued to find her inconsequence a too emphatic trait, and failed to give her credit for the strength of character which really lay behind. If he had ever watched her dealings with his father, or stopped to think how completely she had mastered him himself, that first day in the church, he might more easily have understood. But her frivolity dazzled even while it amused him, and when his first feeling of irritation passed, it was only to be replaced by a half contemptuous tolerance, which set him to extend to her the patronizing deference which is accorded to the opinions of a child.

But Sara Lukievna's irresponsibility was wholly an attitude of mind. There was nothing in the ordinary life about her which called for a melancholy face, and behind her smiles there were depths of character profound enough to match bravely all the deeper needs that opportunity or accident might bring. They were distinct reserves, though, of her being and it is scarcely to be wondered at that till he stumbled

on them bluntly, Thoma Kolomin should not have suspected they were there.

The first demonstration came to him in the garden which Vassili Balin had established at the house at the gate. The young man had happened in there with a message from his mother, and found Sara Lukievna outside in the sun. She was standing by a basket improvised into a cradle and hung from a slanting pole which had its fastening behind a cleat nailed to the house. In her hands there was a branch of willows which she was trying to fasten to the suspending cord so that it would come as a shade between the face of the child that lay below and the already high-risen sun. She heard his footsteps, and looked around at him over her shoulder, and seeing who it was, she greeted him with a nod.

"Oh, I am glad you came!" she cried. "I have lost all the patience that I ever had. Come here and see if you can fasten this branch on so that it will stay." He advanced to where she was, and, after studying the problem gravely for a moment, began with deft fingers to perform the required task.

"My mother sent for you," he said, without

taking his eyes from his work. "She is getting out the clothing for the summer, and wants you to come and pick out your own things." The girl gave a little exclamation of regret.

"Oh!" she said. "Why did you not come and tell me when you first came out for work? Lisa is away now, and I can not send the baby back after borrowing him, and besides I promised Vassili that I would watch his bees for him until he got back from the shore." The young man paused and looked at her inquiringly, and then let his eyes go curiously out in examination around the garden space.

"The baby you could take with you," he said thoughtfully, "but I did not even know that there were bees in this place."

"Nobody would think of having them but Vassili," she answered. "He has two hives now. He brought the first one from the other side two years ago." She indicated their direction with a nod, and after a moment he distinguished the conical straw-topped boxes set low among the bushes at the eastern end.

"But why do you have to watch them?" he said. "I supposed that they did fairly without help."

“So they do, usually. But they have been queer and excited all the morning, and Vassili was worried for fear that they were going to swarm. Are you afraid of them?” she added, seeing that he continued to look irresolutely across the open space. He smiled and tolerantly shook his head.

“No, not afraid. I am interested, because I know nothing of their ways.”

“Come and see them, then,” she said. “They will not bother you, if you do not go too near.” She paused to pull down on the cord which held the cradle to the slanted beam so that the box began to move slowly up and down, and with a last pat to the covers around the sleeping child, she left him and led the way across the garden to the hives.

“There is the one for the new swarm, if it comes,” she said, pointing to a third box which stood a little space apart. “Vassili got it ready yesterday, so as not to be unprepared.” She waited while he examined it, and then went on with him till they were near enough to the other hives plainly to see the bees.

“The one on the right is the one I have to watch,” she said. “The other one is weaker

and will not swarm this year." He followed her explanations attentively and stood watching the busy life around the doorways of the boxes with interested eyes.

There was little to see about the weaker hive. Bees were coming and going from it in fairly regular procession, but without interference with one another and apparently in accordance with some preconcerted plan. But in front of the other there was a knot of excited insects which unraveled and moved about and tangled together again aimlessly, while from within the hive there came continuously a low and uneasy hum. The girl's curiosity inspired her and after a moment's listening she again moved forward. Thoma Kolomin began to follow her, but as soon as she noticed it, she lifted a detaining hand.

"Stay where you are," she said. "I am used to them so they will not interfere with me, but they might sting you if you came too close." He obeyed her promptly and moved back to where they had been before. The girl went boldly forward and bent attentively above the active hive. A dozen or two of bees rose up and circled round her head, but she paid no atten-

tion, and after a moment's inspection came back to where he stood.

"There are more out now than there were when I last looked," she said. "I believe they are really going to swarm." She went to a shelf against the wall of the stockade and took down a pair of leathern gloves to which long gauntlets of cloth had been attached. These had strings fastened to their upper ends and when her hands were properly inside, she came to him and held out her arms.

"Tie these for me," she said. "I like the bees, but I do not want them crawling up my sleeves." He was clumsy at his task, and she watched him with amusement in her eyes.

"You never tied anything before for a woman, did you?" she said demurely. "At least I do not believe you ever tied anything before for a woman who had red hair." She saw the flush start in his cheeks, but this time there was no one to witness his discomfiture and he sturdily held his ground.

"I suppose red hair does make one more impatient," he said quietly. "This is the first time that I ever tied anything for a woman, because it is the first time I was ever asked."

“But why have you waited to be asked?” she demanded promptly. “You ought to know without telling when there is a need.”

“No,” he persisted. “My hair is dark, and I have to come slowly at such things as I get.” Her hands rested frankly against him, and he could not but feel, as he smoothed the gauntlets down, how firm and full-muscled her arms were underneath her sleeves. The recollection of her resolution not to tease him came suddenly back to Sara Lukievna, and she set herself to make amends.

“You have done well,” she said when he had let her go. “With a few more lessons I shall not be afraid to recommend you to any woman in the post.”

“But why do you put them on at all?” he said. “If the bees go out, you can do nothing but watch them till Vassili Balin comes.” She turned on him with a note of resolution in her voice.

“How do you know?” she cried defiantly. “I can do almost as much with them as Vassili can, and honestly I hope he will not get back till after they have swarmed. I am sure he would trust me with them.”

“Well, I think you are going to have your wish,” he said. “They are starting now, if I make no mistake.” The girl’s whole attention went promptly to the hive, and they both stood in silence, watching breathlessly the development of the going of the migrant swarm. Bees were pouring out along the whole front of the box in a swift and continuous stream, and as fast as they came to the edge of the platform on which it stood, they rose in the air and began circling round and round, till the cloud of them looked like a skein of tangled thread. Sara Lukievna’s quicker eye caught the first evidence of further change.

“There they go,” she cried suddenly and pointed with her hand. Thoma Kolomin followed the direction of her finger, and saw that a streamer of bees had detached itself from the central whorl and was extending out across the garden in the direction of the gate. The girl continued to watch till she was sure there was no mistake.

“Come,” she said, “we must follow them till they stop. I hope they will not go beyond the wall.” She walked with upturned face and kept her glance along the line of flight in the effort

to determine by thus sighting at what point the swift pilgrimage would end.

“They are flying low,” she said. “I do not think they will go far.” The young man’s eyes, too, were on the moving swarm, and without answer he moved along with her, till suddenly he heard her give a startled little scream.

“Oh, the baby!” she cried, and went forward with a rush. His eyes came promptly down to follow her and, seeing the cause for her alarm, he broke into a run.

By chance the bees’ line of progress had passed directly over the child’s suspended bed. The branch tied to the rope to give him shade had proved attractive as a clustering spot, and already at its outer end there was collected a good-sized ball of bees. Sara Lukievna was first on the spot, and when Thoma Kolomin reached it she was turning the branch to one side so that the settling insects should no longer hang over the bed. She moved it slowly and with great care, and when it was bent so that the menacing cluster was clear of the cradle’s edge, she turned her face to him with a smile.

“That was a close call,” she said. “Take Sasha up before he comes to harm.” Bees

which had lost their footing and dropped from the mass above were crawling on the coverlet around the child, but lifting the cloth by the edge about its face, the young man shook the insects off and prepared to follow her commands. But with the first move to lift the baby up, she stopped him with a cry.

"Wait, wait!" she said. "If you take the weight off the rope, it will draw the branch up suddenly out of my hands!" He let go the child, and raising himself looked at her in some perplexity.

"There is a bee on your neck," he said irrelevantly. "Shall I take it off?"

"No, it will go away of itself in a moment. Stoop down slowly, without appearing to make haste, and find the rocking cord and put it on my foot." He went down on one knee, and taking hold of the foot-loop, slipped it underneath her sole.

"That is better," she said. "I think now you can take Sasha up."

"What shall I do with him?" he asked when the child was safely in his arms. The unexpected lifting had awakened it, and it began to squirm and wriggle in his grasp. Sara looked

around at him, and in spite of her preoccupation smiled.

“Put your hand underneath his back and he will be stiller,” she said. “Do not drop him! Take him into the house, and lay him in the middle of the first bed that you find.” She followed him with her glance till he was out of sight, and when he came back she still had a wicked twinkle in her eyes.

“What a practical godfather you are!” she said mischievously. “I am proud that I got you for the child.” He looked sharply at her from under his eyelids, but to his surprise he found in himself no stir of the old irritation, and with a frank surrender to her daring, he laughed.

“It is good discipline for a man, I suppose,” he admitted guardedly. “But I believe there are more comfortable places to learn in than your school.” She knew then she was forgiven, and judiciously let the subject drop.

“Come here,” she said, “and cut away this branch. The bees have stopped coming and I think we can put them in the hive.” He produced a knife and began carefully to sever the bond which bound the bough end to the rope.

"Be careful," she said, as the branch began to slip. "Loosen it without jarring, or you will have them all off on the ground." It was a large swarm, and in finding room to cling it had occupied the branch to where she held it, so that it covered both her hands. She braced herself as he cut the final knots, and held her arms stiffly, so that they should take the strain. It took more effort than she had surmised and finding her burden sagging downward, she gave a quick gasp of dismay. The weight of the bees and the necessity for deliberate movements appalled her for the moment.

"You will have to help me somehow," she said with tense precision. "They weigh so much I can not hold them up." He looked at the bees, and then at his own bare hands, and with a sudden inspiration came behind her and reaching around her on either side, took hold of her arms below the elbows, so as to brace them against the strain.

"That will help, I think," he said. "Between us we ought to be able to keep them from going down." It gave her a curious feeling to find herself thus unexpectedly in his arms. For a moment she stiffened almost unconsciously, but her sense of humor saved her, and she threw

back her head so as to gain a glimpse of him behind.

“It is a good thing I am not fat,” she said mischievously. “If I were as big as Masha, you would not get so far out on my arms.” He turned his face to one side so as to avoid her hair.

“You are much stronger than one would think,” he said quietly. “No one could long hold out a load at arm’s length like that.” It was his first commendation of her, and her eyes began to dance.

“Well, let us get rid of them if we can,” she said. “I think if we are careful, we can take them to their hive.”

“Go as you like and I will follow you,” he answered, and starting cautiously they moved in slow procession to the appointed place. She paused in front of it to give a last command to her helper.

“That hive must be opened so that I can get them underside,” she said. “If you are quick, I can hold them while you turn it back.” He began cautiously to withdraw his hands, but before she was out of his arms there was a step behind them, and a sudden call.

"Wait, I will help," it said, and the girl gave an exclamation of relief.

"It is Vassili," she announced. "There will be no more trouble now." The old man passed by them without speaking, and occupied himself at once with lifting up the hive.

"Put them under here," he said; and Sara Lukievna, bending forward with the same deliberate caution that she had before displayed, deposited her burden on the platform floor. Vassili Balin let down the hive until it almost rested on her wrists.

"Let go the branch now, carefully, and take out your hands," he said. She obeyed him, and as she drew back, he brushed down the bees that clung to her with a little stick. When she was clear, she straightened herself, and stood watching him as he shook and cautiously pulled out the branch. Thoma Kolomin was so interested that he remained with his arms around her, holding to her wrists, and following with absorbed attention across her shoulder all that the old man did. Both Vassili Balin and the girl remained with their eyes fixed intently on the hive, until the buzzing of the swarm inside changed to a peculiar whirring hum. Then they

looked at each other significantly and the old man nodded his head.

"They will stay," he said with a smile, and Sara Lukievna came back to her ordinary world. Twisting her head slightly so she could see Thoma Kolomin's face, she looked him demurely in the eyes.

"Perhaps you had better let me go now," she said. "I do not think I shall need further help." His hands dropped away from her as if the words had given him some sudden shock. The girl turned back again and spoke to the old man.

"You spoiled my plan by coming," she said reproachfully. "I wanted to put them in alone." Vassili Balin did not even raise himself or look at her, but remained bent above his work.

"It takes men to handle bees," he said dryly.

"Just listen to him!" burst out the girl indignantly. "Pray, what do you call Thoma Pavelovitch here, if he is not a man?" She turned to him as she spoke, with a wave of her open hand. But the words were still in her mouth when she stiffened suddenly in her place, and stood as if planted, her mouth open and her

eyes turned on the young man in a most tragic look of horror and surprise.

“Oh!” she cried, “Oh!” And before he could move or even catch his breath, her hands swooped down and clutched convulsively at her clothing just below her knees, and with a knot of it held out from her, she broke away from them and ran like a whirlwind toward the house. Vassili Balin watched her over his shoulder till she was out of sight, and then winked knowingly at the younger man.

“That comes of having skirts,” he said with a grin. “I told her it took a man to keep clear of the bees.”

But the experience with the swarming was not the only adventure which came to Sara Lukievna from the presence of the insects in the yard. It was perhaps two weeks later, that, as she was busy with her broom in the front part of the house, there was a tap on the unlatched door, it swung silently inward, and she saw there was a woman standing on the step outside.

She recognized her at once as the mother of one of the otter hunters who lived in a small cottage on the lower ground. The woman was a

new-comer, and the girl knew her more by her reputation as a curer of ailments and adviser in the family affairs of others than by actual experience of her in the flesh. She paused in her sweeping, and nodded to her visitor with a smile.

“Good morning, little mother,” she said. “Will you come in?” The woman remained with her hand on the door, as she had pushed it open, and, bending forward, looked searchingly into every corner of the room. Seeing no one but Sara Lukievna, she shook her head silently and beckoned to the girl mysteriously with her hand. Sara Lukievna hesitated a moment, and then came across the apartment to the door.

“What is it that you want?” she said expectantly. The woman’s face lit with a fawning eagerness, and she drew the girl down to her, so that she could whisper in her ear.

“O my golden beauty, my red sun,” she said in sibilant undertone, the words falling over one another in their anxious haste. “My heart told me from the beginning that you would be gentle toward me, and help me to what I wish.” The girl held herself as she was, though her

eyes lit at the promise of adventure and she laughed delightedly aloud.

"You give me a real thrill with your secrecy, mother," she said. "What is it that you desire?" By way of answer the woman lifted her hand and bent back her head, as if listening to some sound outside. She began to describe slow circles with her uplifted finger in the air, accompanying the motion with a low humming murmur in her throat. Then with an abrupt return of attention, she stopped and put her fingers again upon the other's arm.

"Seven," she said enigmatically. "I will find for you a charm and you shall give me seven. It is a good charm," she added eagerly, as she saw that the girl did not promptly speak. Sara Lukievna was, however, simply uncertain what was asked.

"Is it bees you want?" she said in some hesitation; "seven bees?" The woman's face lit responsively, and she gave the girl's arm a sudden squeeze.

"Yes," she breathed.

"Then why do you come to me for them?" asked the girl curiously. "They are everywhere outside on the flowers." The woman's mobile

face sobered, and there came into it again something of its first appeal.

“You will not refuse me,” she said coaxingly. “I could get them, yes, my proud one, but what power would they have for me, if they did not come to me as a gift? Think of the charm,” she urged insinuatingly, “the splendid charm!” Sara Lukievna’s interest kept her from yielding too ready an assent.

“But I have a good charm already,” she demurred; “a relic charm which has never left my neck since I was born.”

“Then it shall be a fortune,” broke in the woman promptly. “I will tell it for you, and you shall see what is to come.”

“I think I might like to know that,” returned the girl demurely. “But what possible use can you have for seven bees?” The woman’s manner became more mysteriously impressive and her voice dropped to a whisper as she spoke.

“They will take the word for me to the Mother of Bees,” she said. “To-morrow is the one day, and I shall send a greeting to her by each one.” The girl started to cross herself, but restrained her hand and turned to the older woman with excited eyes.

"I wish I could see it!" she said breathlessly. "It must be lovely to do things like that!" The woman vouchsafed no promise to the suggestion, though her manner implied that she did not refuse the request outright.

"Bring me the bees," she said sententiously, "and I will not forget to tell Her that you made the gift."

"When do you want them?" asked the girl.

"To-morrow, without fail. But do not take them too early, lest they have to go on their journey with empty bags upon their legs."

"You shall have them," returned Sara Lukievna with a smile. "I will bring them to you myself."

She delayed the capture until well toward the following noon. Then with her prisoners in a covered glass she came to Lisa Fedorovna, and asked for a piece of the blue paper in which sugar loaf was wrapped. The older woman gave it to her and watched her curiously as she twisted it into a cone and deftly transferred the bees to the new place.

"What are you going to do with them?" she said inquiringly.

"They are the price of my fortune," returned

the girl lightly. "A baba is going to tell it for me this afternoon." Lisa Fedorovna's brows drew together disapprovingly, and she shook her head with some reserve.

"That is hardly Christian, is it?" she said slowly. "Surely you do not believe she can do a thing like that!"

"That is just what I am going to find out," answered the girl demurely. "If she does not tell me anything worth while, there will be nothing very wicked in the trying, and if she does, it will be worth the penance I shall have to do for it, when I confess to Father Damian at the church." But the girl's casuistic philosophy did not come to final test, for during the afternoon she developed a sudden indisposition which confined her temporarily to a couch, and made impossible the keeping of her word about the bees. The responsibility for the failure, however, preyed upon her mind, and as the afternoon shadows began to grow long in the room, she stirred uneasily, and put aside the wet cloth from her forehead so that she could see.

"Why can not you take the bees to the baba for me?" she said to Lisa Fedorovna. "I gave her my word that she should have them without

fail." The older woman looked up at her thoughtfully.

"I do not mind the going," she said indulgently, "but why not wait until to-morrow, when you can go yourself? She will not tell your fortune to any one but you."

"That is true," said the girl; "but the bees will be of no use to her unless they go to her to-day, and if they do not, then there will be no fortune told for me at all." Lisa Fedorovna shrugged her shoulders deprecatingly, but she laid aside her work.

"Well, I shall have to take them for you, I suppose," she said resignedly. "But, somehow, it seems such a foolish thing to do." She did not trouble to make difference in her dress, but, drawing her shawl about her head like a peasant woman, took the cone with its now quiet captives and set out upon her way.

The house of the baba stood somewhat apart from the others of the settlement, and as Lisa Fedorovna approached it, she could see the fortune-teller sitting in the door. The woman was evidently watching for the coming of Sara Lukievna, for when she caught sight of her visitor she got eagerly to her feet, and, shading her

eyes with her hand, looked till she made sure that the person before her was not the girl whom she expected, when she again sat down. Lisa Fedorovna continued her advance until she stood directly before the seated figure, but the baba remained with her hands clasped around her knees, and vouchsafed no attention, except that her eyes raised themselves to those of her visitor in a sort of suspicious challenge. Lisa Fedorovna spoke at once.

“Sara Lukievna sent me,” she said, “to bring the bees she promised you to-day.” The woman continued to stare at her silently, though her eyes lit with a gleam of satisfaction she could not conceal. Then she stood up, and reaching out took hold of Lisa Fedorovna by the arm.

“Come,” she said under her breath, and drew her visitor after her across the sill. Lisa Fedorovna responded to the impulse almost without thinking, but once inside the house, she stopped abruptly, and stood to look quickly round the room.

The place was scrupulously neat and airy, and the steep-pitched roof gave it a special sense of spaciousness and height. The light came from

a narrow window at one side and, in front of this, a heavy table had been set. Besides this, beyond a chair or two the apartment was conspicuously barren of all furnishings, and the only thing that was unusual in its aspect was that above the lamp-shelf, where the icon should have hung, instead of a holy picture there was a forked branch of fir.

The baba waited with shrewd, half-closed eyes, on the process of her visitor's orientation. Then, with the assured motion of one who has the right, she leaned forward and took the blue cone from Lisa Fedorovna's hands.

"I promised the girl a fortune," she said abruptly. "Why did she not come for it herself?"

"She was ill and could not," responded the other promptly. "She is hoping that you will let her come to you some other time." The baba's eyes dropped to the floor abstractedly, and shaking the cone gently she held it to her ear.

"I do not forget a service," she said proudly. "She has my word that the fortune will be told." She stood irresolutely for a moment, giving her attention to the sounds from within

the cone. Then, with a swift abruptness that was as compelling as a command, she raised her eyes again to Lisa Fedorovna's face.

"And you!" she said. "What is it that you expect?" Lisa Fedorovna met the look frankly and her lips parted in a smile.

"I expect nothing, mother," she said. "I came only to bring the bees to you for the child." The woman's exploring gaze continued fastened on her, as if it were searching down into her very soul, and her mobile face lit with an unexpected interest.

"Why should you not ask," she said, "when there is that in your life concerning which you can never have peace until you know?" A sudden flush of color swept over Lisa Fedorovna's face at the unexpectedness of the suggestion, but she answered with a smile and a fairly even voice.

"Even if there could be an answer," she said, "I have no claim on you which gives me the right to ask it at your hands." The woman made a quick gesture of impatience, and came so close that her eager face was almost against Lisa Fedorovna's own.

"You are the woman who does not go for

confession to the priest," she said shrewdly. Lisa Fedorovna made affirmative answer, though the response was with her eyes rather than with her voice. The baba's face lit with a gleam of satisfaction.

"I am another," she said simply, as if the dubious distinction formed for the two of them some sort of bond. Lisa Fedorovna made no objection to the claim; though she showed no interest in the woman's proffered aid.

"If I had believed that you could help me, mother," she said wistfully, "I should have been on my knees to you the moment I came in. I have no faith that any one can tell beforehand the things that are to come." The baba bent to her with a swift look of sympathy.

"I know," she said, "how many times the message is not clear. But what would you do if I told to you the truth?" Lisa Fedorovna drew in her breath in a sharp panic of dismay.

"I should not want to hear it," she cried resentfully. "Mine is a trouble which belongs to me alone." The baba laid her hand soothingly on the other's arm.

"Will my knowledge be less because you do not listen?" she said gently. "And even if the

truth prove bitter, is not certainty better than suspense?" Lisa Fedorovna shook her head stubbornly, but the woman did not wait for her to speak, but drew her half-resisting to the table across the room.

"Stand there," she said with quiet authority. "I can be stopped at any time when you have heard enough." There was that in the fortune-teller's manner which imposed itself indisputably on Lisa Fedorovna's will and she remained where she had been placed, and watched rebelliously the woman's preparations for the spell.

They were so simple that their accomplishment scarcely brought a thrill. The fortune-teller set the bees carefully to one side, and spread the table with a white linen cloth. Then from a chest of drawers, she brought a wooden box with brass ears at the corners to which were fastened leathern thongs. These she knotted together and caught up with a cord which hung loosely from the rafter overhead, so that the box remained suspended above the table at an even height.

She touched it here and there to stop the motion and blew lightly across the lid, as if to drive away some lingering trace of dust. This

done, she retired a step from the table and stood with her hands clasped loosely in front of her and her eyes fixed steadfastly on the box, until it lost its weaving motion and came to perfect rest. Then she turned to Lisa Fedorovna with serious eyes.

"Everything is ready," she said gravely. "It will be only a short time now till you will know." She did not wait for an answer, but moved swiftly across the room to the holy corner, and stood with her back to Lisa Fedorovna, her right hand lifted and her face reverently upturned to the branch above the icon lamp.

The invocation lasted but a moment, and she came back to the table and began to turn the box round and round, from left to right, so as to put a twist in the suspending cord. From time to time she tested the process by lifting, to see if relieved of the box's weight the spiral tension would draw the tether into knots. When the limit of the strain seemed reached, she paused with the box held stiffly between her hands and, turning her head slowly, let her eyes rest searchingly on the woman who was looking on.

Lisa Fedorovna had been conscious from the first of how tall and gaunt the woman was, and

of the vague distinction of authority given her by her aquiline profile and high thin cheeks. But as the baba faced her now with the spirit of supernatural possession burning in her eyes, she was conscious that the glance fixed itself on her with a new and compelling sense of power.

The look was like a command in its peremptory challenge for surrender, and she was conscious within her of a sudden panicky fear, lest, in spite of her resistance, the creature's eyes would force the barrier of her disinclination, and explore the secrets of her most hidden thought. Her whole personality cried out against the unwelcome intrusion, and with a quick indrawing of the breath, she gathered herself for a defense. But before she could put her outcry into words, the woman withdrew her glance, her head turned slowly back, and she bent again above the box with such absolute absorption that the watcher stopped where she was, with the baffled sense that for the time at least the opportunity for protest had somehow slipped away.

The resentment, however, still burned uncomfortably in her heart, the more so that there began to stir in her mind the uncomfortable fear

that perhaps the woman did have in her some measure of the power she claimed. It was an unpleasant thought, and she struggled to keep it from her, holding herself alert to repel assaults on the citadel of her reserve, and watching the divination with a fascination which lay between hope and fear. The baba meanwhile gave her no further attention, but absorbed herself wholly in the weaving of her spell.

She had let go of the box, and it was turning slowly round with the untwisting of the cord. At the same time she set open an orifice in the bottom of the receptacle, so that its contents began to sift down on to the table in a black, whirling cloud. At first Lisa Fedorovna could not distinguish what this substance was which fell. But as it settled on the white cloth and showed more clearly in the light she saw that the stream was made up of some sort of seeds, flat and small, and so light that the turn of the box gave them a hesitant motion as they fell.

From the time that the vent was opened, the baba forgot the world, and her eyes remained glued to the uneven pattern which laid itself upon the cloth. She held herself stiffly, but her nervous hands went fluttering out around the

falling spirals, following their course as if she were molding them according to a plan and conducting them safely to their place upon the cloth. At the same time, she began to talk in an undertone, muttering unintelligibly to herself and punctuating her speech with staccato exclamations, as her eager fingers interpreted unexpected curves.

It was a long time before the box came fully to a stop, but the baba's patience was unflagging, and her eyes continued to challenge the kaleidoscopic pattern, till the last seed was down. Assured of this, she bent still lower, her head held to one side so that it would avoid the box, and commenced with renewed animation the study of the pattern as a whole. She left the design to itself, however, beyond touching it here and there inquiringly with her fingers and brushing into little heaps along the edges outlying whorls of seed which seemed to have no connection with the general plan.

Suddenly she stopped, with the thumb and finger of one hand held on adjacent spots, her glance running anxiously over the remainder of the cloth, as if in search of something that was lacking to her mind. Then, with a cry of

satisfaction, she discovered what she sought, and, fixing it with the index finger of her other hand, for the first time since she began upon her conjuring, she spoke intelligibly aloud.

"I can see," she said with sudden eagerness, "but it is a far place—too far!" The woman who was watching her was startled by the unexpected announcement, and moved impulsively to one side, so that she could get a better view of the speaker's face.

"What is it?" she breathed. "What is it that you see?" The baba paid no attention to the interruption, but lifted her forefinger from where it had been placed, and after a moment's indecision set it decidedly on another spot.

"There is a house," she announced dreamily, "and a place with trees, and people, and a stranger who comes, and sunshine, and laughing, and—when the stranger took your hands you shrank and were afraid." If she had looked at Lisa Fedorovna she would have seen how mercilessly her revelation had set out the truth. The younger woman had waited tolerantly on the divination, braced by the conviction that her secrets would surely be beyond the woman's power to read. Her unexpected

approach to them came to Lisa Fedorovna with a shock which took away her breath.

“No, no!” she cried chokingly, and put out her hand. But the baba did not hear her and remained bent above the table as before. Her hands moved farther along in the maze of seeds, and she went back again and again over the same ground, beginning where she had spoken last, and moving slowly and patiently forward to a point beyond which perplexity would not let her go. Finally she paused, and straightening her back, spoke, with her hands still on the table space.

“It was a great struggle and a long one,” she said, “but it was the awakening of your soul to life. You were right in making choice, for you followed the dictates of your heart. It was not you who acted, but the Powers that willed it, and sent to you the call.” She paused with her eyes half closed, as if in introspection, and then went on with an almost apologetic air.

“It is a long way from there to here, and there are many things to see, if they were not so dim. As it is I see something like a wedding, and a journey, and a time to wait. But over it all there is sorrow and a shadow that in some

places hangs as black as the shadow of death." She stopped abruptly and raised her head sharply with a quick opening of her eyes. "Wait—" she said as if a new idea had come to her, "of death?"

She bent eagerly to the table, and her hands began to run with increasing speed over the pattern until they fairly flew. Her interest grew with the interpretation until it was near to frenzy as she worked, and her breath began to come in convulsive little gasps. She had the air of one who holds out stoutly against a conviction which was unwelcome, but as she proceeded, her manner changed subtly from doubt to the certainty of one convinced against her hope. With a shuddering gesture of the body, she raised her head and turned on Lisa Fedorovna with a look which was so full of horror and accusation that it was beyond the latter's strength to bear. Lisa Fedorovna shrank under it as if she had been struck, and with an outbreathing that was almost a scream, she plunged forward and caught the baba in her arms.

"You shall not!" she cried. "I will not hear the rest!" The woman struggled wildly and

strove to break away. But Lisa Fedorovna, reaching by her, caught at the table-cloth, so that she dragged it off on to the floor.

“You can not do it now!” she cried triumphantly, and thrusting the woman from her with such force that only her falling against the table saved her from going down, she whirled and fled wildly from the room.

CHAPTER VI

LUKA'S EYES ARE OPENED

Pavel Kolomin waited in vain for visible proof of the reconciliation between husband and wife which he had so earnestly desired. But, in a way of which he had not dreamed, the seed that he had planted found root in fertile ground. The sense of justice, awakened when he had first been spoken to about the matter, stirred subtly in Luka Strukof's brain, quickening him steadily to the conviction that he was indeed not giving to the woman who shared his lot as generous a measure of devotion as she dealt out to him.

As was usual with him, the idea was a long time in coming to the point of definite recognition in his mind. But the beginnings once established, the advance was sure and every day brought new conviction of the truth. He discovered himself moved to uneasiness when, on return, he found her absent from the house. It

began to stir him with a vague sense of loneliness to see her above him on the bluff, outlined against the windy sky, and it came to him with a rush of accusation that her shoulders were bent and her step listless as she went about her work.

It was characteristic of the man, however, that even when the conviction became certain in his mind, it did not move him to act promptly toward making the matter right. He was conscious of his fault and burdened by it, but the galling of the load was not sufficiently uncomfortable to spur him to its immediate setting down. Yet the sting of it awakened in him a new attentiveness toward Lisa Fedorovna, even where he made no definite decision that he would be kind.

Almost unconsciously, he found himself lingering at his midday meal, that he might be with her for the longer time. More than once he was prompted to the use of tender speech, that he might see the lovely flood of color it brought up in her cheeks. He fell to doing for her the multitude of little things that take the drudgery from women's work. His feet wandered more and more into hitherto untried pathways

of her life, and these signs multiplied in kind, until, at last, without consent, his miracle stood worked in him, and he recognized that he had fallen in love with his wife.

But when the knowledge came, it was with no burst of revelation so that he knew that it was sure. He was conscious in a shamefaced way that Lisa Fedorovna's eyes had begun to appeal to him with an unexpected power. He discovered that there was a new thrill of happiness for him in the sudden touch of her hand. But the fitting together of these things, so that the pattern should be complete, could only be the work of time; and it was not till the snows were down, and they had come close to the day of the cold St. George, that the final illumination came.

He had been moody and disinclined, so that the commandant noticed that he was listless at his work. From the time of their talk, there had come to be a certain renewal of the old fellowship between the two, and Pavel Kolomin was moved to pity as he noted the man's white face and shaking hands as he went about his work.

“Why do you not go more into the open?”

he said abruptly. "You will be a dead man, if you stay here always in the house." Luka Strukof paused with his pen on the word he had been writing, and looked up at the commandant with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

"And what would you do with the work here if I did?" he said quietly.

"Better, perhaps, than if you go on and kill yourself, so that in the end I have it all to do," returned the other bluntly. Luka Antonovitch laughed, and threw back his hair.

"It will not be as bad as that," he said deprecatingly. "And until it is, you will get more out of me with a pen than with any work that I could do outside."

"I do not know about that," said the commandant thoughtfully, "but it seems to me to be a thing that I should rather like to test. Put up your accounts, man, and get something warmer on your feet. I have in mind to give you a taste of the snow outside, and it is no place for comfort without heavy boots."

"But I can not work outside, Pavel Pavelovitch. It is not my way."

"You will do it as well as the man whose

place you are going to take. Sanka Pronin has hurt his foot, and I want you to make his round back by the lake. It is only patrol work and requires nothing more than sharp eyes and steady legs." Luka Antonovitch looked up in quick surprise.

"Patrol work!" he said. "I did not even know there was a need." The commandant's face set gravely and he held his breath a moment before he spoke.

"It has not been spoken of outside," he said in a lower tone, "but there have again been losses at the traps, and for two weeks I have been having the line patrolled." Luka Strukof's eyes lit in comprehension, and he gravely nodded his head.

"My boots are here," he said quietly. "In five minutes I shall be on the road." The commandant waited until he was prepared and went with him outside.

"There are four traps to look out for between here and the lake," he said; "and one more on the north side, across the shallow arm. The first one is in the little meadow just after you leave the river at the second turn. The others follow pretty regularly at intervals of half a

verst. You will find the walking heavy even in the beaten trail, but Pronin told me the ice was strong enough on the arm to save the detour going round."

It was with a distinct sense of elation that Luka Strukof set out upon his task. Since that other day, when his loyalty had been questioned by the commandant, though there had been full cordiality in his intercourse with his superior, there had been nothing more. He had shared in all the routine in which his work as an accountant naturally gave him part. But at this point the limit had been set, and the commandant had allowed himself no mention in his presence of the more intimate and private things connected with the conduct of the post. His selection for duty so eminently confidential marked in his mind a return toward his old estate.

He felt that the eyes of the commandant were following him, even when he was well upon the way. He did not look back, but went swiftly ahead till he was outside the confines of the town. Then he paused for a moment as if to gather himself to a fuller realization of the wider outlook which had come to him, and stood looking eagerly around.

There had been a four days' storm, and the ice of the river, the ground and the trees and shrubs around him, were white with feathery snow. It lay over everything in broad unbroken drifts. The woods were choked with it, and even the rock faces of the mountain at the end of the canyon beyond the lake were blanketed to the top with the thick fleecy folds.

With the exception of the green of the firs, and an occasional rift of blue that showed between the clouds above the mountain line, there was not a touch of color either in earth or sky. The air was absolutely still, and, in all the expanse around him, his eye rested on no single thing that moved or was alive.

For a moment the peace of the place, its calm serenity, moved him to a sense of restfulness that was a keen delight. But only for a moment. The desolateness of it all, the coldness, the sharp lack of color, stole in upon him all unconsciously, and he found himself looking wistfully back toward the human habitations he had left behind.

The stockade and houses were hidden by the trees, but the smoke from the chimneys rose up above them in high blue lines, and stood like

signals to mark the location of the desired land. He watched the motionless columns almost eagerly, striving to discover from their position which one belonged to his own house at the gate. This brought him to another train of thought, and his eye went searching the bare summit of the bluff, in the hope that he might come upon the figure of Lisa Fedorovna in her customary place. But the sky-line, too, as far as he could see, was empty of all life. After a lingering moment, he came back to the matter he had in hand and with a sigh went slowly out again along his appointed road.

The first and second traps he found without difficulty, and noted with satisfaction that they were still as they were when they had first been set. The third lay back in a little hollow and was more difficult to see. When he did locate it, it required only the most casual glance to discover that it had been disturbed.

The trap was empty and unset, but the trampled snow beneath it and a stain of blood that lay upon the white, gave witness that some furry captive had within a short time been gripped within its jaws. It was equally plain that the prisoner was no longer there; and, this

once established, Luka Strukof's eyes lifted and went searching hurriedly around.

He knew that the removal had not been regular, for, if it had, the snow beneath the snare would have been smoothed again and the trap reset for further catch. In his excitement, he stepped suddenly back and the crack of a branch, as his foot pressed down upon it, startled him so that he almost cried aloud.

For a moment he stood rigidly erect, his glances darting from one to another of the coverts round about. He saw no danger, however, and after a breathing space came back to the problem he had in hand. The stick on which he had stepped lay on the surface, entirely clear of snow, and must have been brought to its present position from some thicket, since the storm. He stooped to examine it, and guessed, from the marks on the larger end, that it had been used to pry apart the jaws of the trap so as to take the imprisoned captive out.

No further traces of the marauder showed, except that here and there he found fresh foot-prints in the snow. These afforded him no information from their shape and the only thing unusual about them was that, besides the

jumble of them near the trap, they went in a distinct circle round and round it at a distance of some feet. The trampled line of it was made plainer by a broad band of scratches in the snow, which followed with the footprints and over them, as if the person making them had dragged some burden after him as he went.

“His bag was heavy,” he thought with a grim smile. “He had been elsewhere before coming here.”

Satisfied that there was no more to see, he went on again along the trail, listening for sounds and challenging sharply with his eyes each approaching bush and tree. His pace quickened involuntarily as he came to the place where the fourth trap was set, but approach to it brought to him no new alarms.

It lay in its place untouched, the jaws open and the bait half hidden by the fresh-fallen snow. But about it there were footsteps, as there had been at the one before; and with small speculation Luka Antonovitch understood that the intruder had been here, too, before him, but finding no booty, had passed on. He went on cautiously with senses well alert, nursing the hope that he would come upon the robber before

he reached the final trap. Forewarned by the knowledge of what he might expect, he now made out again and again the telltale boot-tracks before him in the trail, making recognition of them surer, by the lines of scratches which passed over them in the deeper drifts where the burden carried by the maker of them had again dragged too low.

It was a longer stretch between the fourth trap and the last, and before he reached the lake he had lost much of his conviction of success. But as he came out into the triangular valley, where the trail took to the ice and cut off across the shallow arm of the lake, he came suddenly to a stop and drew back for shelter behind a boulder by the way.

The trail itself was bare, but on the opposite side, where it climbed the bank and disappeared among the trees, his watchful eye had caught with certainty the vision of some object moving against the staring background of the snow. It was only a moment before it passed out of sight, but in that time he had recognized it as a human being and knew that he was close upon the meeting with the person he had come to seek.

He stood motionless for an instant, considering what to do. To follow out upon the ice was to invite detection and set the thief upon his guard. The trail around the arm was for the most part flanked by trees, and he decided promptly that to take it offered the only reasonable course. The first hundred feet of it was open to the lake and he plunged along it at full speed, stopping breathless at the first shelter to look across the ice for some sign that he had been observed.

There was no movement there that he could see, and he started on at once, making such progress as he could along the disused path. When he came round the turn and commenced on his journey back along the arm, he began to move with caution and kept an ear turned always forward for sound or movement there ahead. He left the trail before it joined the other from the lake and made a detour, so as to come to the place where the trap was, from the other side.

It was difficult work in the deep feathery snow, and he raged inwardly at the creak of his felt boots as his weight pressed them heavily down. He persisted, however, and came finally

to a vantage point where, unobserved, he could look freely out upon the scene. The place was a natural clearing, saucer-shaped and round, and the snare had been set at about the lowest point. His eyes went to it at once and he almost shouted with delight as he saw that he had come in time.

The trap was sprung, but in it was a full-grown fox, caught firmly by the leg. The animal apparently was not conscious of his presence for it stood with its back to him, fixed and motionless, its attention riveted on something in the bushes on the other side. It had dragged the trap after it in that direction out to the end of the short detaining chain, and was so absorbed in what it saw that it leaned forward till its pinioned leg was drawn stiffly out behind.

Instinctively Luka Strukof's eyes went out along the line its watching indicated, and at the same moment from the farther side there came a sharp sound as of breaking wood. The man stepped quickly to one side, so that he could see the point from which the noise had come. But he stopped as suddenly as he had started, for at the place where the trail from the lake

came out into the open he saw a woman, standing with her back turned toward him, bending down. She too was oblivious of his presence, and was trying to twist from its roots a young fir that was dead.

There was something so familiar to him in the stooping figure, that involuntarily he held his breath. His suspense, however, lasted but a moment, for the little tree came up in the woman's hands and, straightening her back, she turned and faced him, and he saw without a chance for doubt that it was Lisa Fedorovna who stood there across the open space.

The meeting with her was so unexpected that he could not move or speak, but stood looking at her in a sort of dumb amaze. He knew, of course, that she ranged wide afield, but somehow it had never come to him that her wanderings would carry her so far. Then there began to stir in him disappointment that was almost impatience, that she should have appeared so inopportunately to the frightening of the marauder who was about to rob the trap.

His first thought was to call to her, but before he could speak she came straight forward in such perfect unconsciousness of his presence

that involuntarily he waited to see what she would do. Her eyes were fixed on the animal in the trap, and, as she approached it, she put out, between her and it, the stick she carried as if it were a club, holding it with both hands well out toward the smaller end.

The fox interpreted the motion as an attack and fled swiftly back as far as his chain allowed. Lisa Fedorovna followed him cautiously, edging to one side as if to take him in the rear. But the animal moved as she did, so that she went round and round it in a circle, watching for her chance. As well as the trap allowed, the frightened beast kept its muzzle toward her, and snapped at the stick when she brought it near his head.

For a moment Luka Antonovitch watched the spectacle with no feeling beyond wonder in his heart. Then the setting of the scene, the trap, the stick, the ring of footsteps in the snow, began mercilessly to tally with another picture in his mind. Like a flash it came to him that it was Lisa Fedorovna and no other who had been at the third trap and that it was her trail he had been following all the time. As a final and convincing proof, he saw now in the trampled

circle, where she walked, a band of parallel scratches begin and follow in her track where her thick skirt dragged down behind her in the deeper snow.

It gripped him hard to find that there was this side to her which he had never guessed. It was not easy for him to admit that Pavel Kolomin had been right and that she had not only consciously deceived him, but had also been disloyal to the post. For a long moment, he stood weighing the probabilities in his mind and trying to explain away the evidence of the strange things he saw. Then, with a wild impulse by action to come squarely to the truth, he swept the concealing branches hurriedly aside, and plunged forward to where she stood.

But while he still remained irresolute in his place, a crisis had come in the play in which Lisa Fedorovna had a part. Seizing some advantage which only she could see, she plunged suddenly forward and pushed the stick between the irons of the trap, near where they came together into jaws. The fox, in sudden panic at the action, pulled madly back, and following in, the woman set her foot swiftly on the trap, and prying down, forced open the detaining jaws,

so that the captive's paw came loose. The fox, wasting no time on the manner of its escape, sprang to its feet and, bolting across the open snow, disappeared promptly among the trees.

Lisa Fedorovna remained with her foot on the trap and the stick in her hands, gazing at the point at which the animal had disappeared. So intent was she in her preoccupation that she was not conscious of the coming of the man behind her, until he reached out and seized her by the arm.

She screamed at the contact and, wresting herself from his grasp, whirled about so that she faced him, the stick falling between them on the snow. Her face was white with the fear of her surprise, but as she recognized who it was that had come upon her, the color flushed up in it again, and, with a stiffening of the body that was almost a defiance, she stood her ground and waited, her hands held tight behind her back. Luka Antonovitch, too, for the moment, found no word to say, but his eyes fixed themselves on hers in bitter question and his face hardened as he saw the challenge in her look.

"Well, where is the other one?" he demanded finally. The tone was rough, and his upper lip

drew back so that it showed the white line of his teeth.

"The other one?" she repeated faintly.

"Yes. The one you got out of the other trap."

"It is gone," she said in the same constrained whisper. "It ran away, like this one, when I let it out." His face softened, though he continued to look at her with a growing stupor of amaze.

"Then you purposely let them go?" he said. "You did not seek to keep them for yourself?" Her courage began to come back to her, and she spoke with a new note of confidence in her voice.

"What if I did?" she said. "Was the doing of it so very great a crime?"

"Yes," he declared. "Because it puts both you and me under a suspicion it will be more than hard to set aside." The perpetual note of fear that sounded in their lives, struck for Lisa Fedorovna so that she went pale again and her eyes began to search his face with a quick sense of dread.

"I do not understand," she faltered.

"No," he returned bitterly. "But it is a true thing, just the same. We have both been

under suspicion for some time. How could I know that the commandant had reason to believe that either of us had treason in his heart? When he dared to make the charge to me, I flung it in his teeth. He took my word that our skirts were clear, though never since has he been quite the same. To-day, for the first time, he gave me a special charge. He knew the animals were being taken from the traps and he sent me out as a patrol to see that it was not done again. When I go back he will expect the whole truth at my hands, and now you have made it so that I can only tell to him a lie. Why did you do it?" he cried. "What was it led you to a thing so mad?" Lisa Fedorovna listened attentively, though she did not at once make answer to the charge. Her hands came out from behind her back and she stood pressing them together and looking out beyond him with unseeing eyes. Twice she made as if she were about to speak, but each time her throat failed her so that she made no sound. When she did answer, it was with conscious effort and her voice sounded husky and constrained.

"I think perhaps it was because I was so lonely," she said finally. "You know I have

not much for comfort when you are away. The animals are the only things I see of which I do not have to be afraid, and when I find them in the traps, it hurts me, as if they had been friends. 'They are caught, Luka!' she cried with an impulsive outward motion of her hands. "They are caught, and can not get away!" She stopped abruptly, struggling to control her voice. The man opposite to her remained stolidly silent and kept his eyes down studiously on the ground.

"Oh, it was all so innocent!" she went on tremulously. "I had no thought of hurting you, or Pavel Kolomin, or anybody, when I let them go. It only came to me how dreadful it was to see them there, when they fought so to be free!" Her voice had been falling lower and lower, until at the end it was so faint that Luka Antonovitch could scarcely hear.

He stirred uneasily in his place, looking up at her again and again from under his lids, and each time letting his glance fall as suddenly, before it came to hers. He understood now, perhaps, better than she did herself, that it was because the plight of the foxes was so pathetically like her own that she had wished to set the

imprisoned creatures free. The pity of it and the outcry against it began to stir madly in his blood, and it was only by strenuous resistance that he restrained himself from reaching out and taking her consolingly in his arms. Repression, however, had become to him as second nature, and even under this temptation he stood wooden and inert, no testimony of his real desire showing in his face.

"I know, I know," he said in a low voice. She drank in greedily the chary comfort thus vouchsafed, and tried to smile up at him, though her eyes were wet.

"You frightened me so," she said apologetically, as if that accounted for all the trouble in her mind. With a quick motion he put out his hand as if to touch her, but before it reached her he drew it back.

"I did not mean to frighten you," he said hurriedly. "It is hard sometimes to avoid unkindness, even when one most wishes to be kind." She listened breathlessly, looking at him with searching seriousness and after a little her eyes grew wide again with her pathetic smile.

"I could almost believe you cared," she said

unsteadily. The passion which for weeks had been growing up in Luka Antonovitch's heart flamed up in him like a consuming fire.

"I do care," he cried huskily. "You ought to know that in your heart!" A soft flush of color rose up in her cheeks, but she still looked at him with the same questioning smile.

"Yes, I suppose you do, Luka," she said sadly. "But oh, it is such a proper care! You would think about me, perhaps, if you came home and did not find me in the house. If I were sick, you would see that I had remedies and care. You would defend me from harm without thought of your life, and if I were dead, you would be grieved and no doubt mourn for me a decent while. But, after all, what is that more than a friend's care for a friend? I have never had from you the love you should show a wife, Luka, and friendship is cold comfort, where the whole heart aches for love. Oh, why could you not spare to me the rest!" she burst out bitterly. "I could have been so happy, if only I had known I had your heart!" He understood her now, and it was a pang to him that he could not gainsay what she had charged as truth.

"I have been blind!" he cried with hasty self-reproach. "It was not fair. I should have given more." Lisa Fedorovna gave a little stifled cry.

"Yes, more—" she said. "But what you gave me, Luka, was all you had to give." He made a sudden movement forward and seized her by the hands.

"No, it is not!" he cried. "God alone knows why He brought us to each other as He did. But if at first, when things came back to me, I failed to show an interest as deep as yours, it was because you were strange to me and new and I could only find myself with time. But do you think that I could live with you and have you with me, day by day, without a stirring at the heart? Am I so dull in showing what I feel, that in all this time you have never guessed how wholly a need to me you are now?" She drew away from him with a perceptible shrinking at his words.

"Hush!" she commanded. "Do you think that I told you this to make you tell me that you cared?"

"But I must tell you," he cried. "I can not be happy until you know!" He tried to draw

her closer, but with a swift movement she twisted from his grasp and sprang quickly back.

“Not to-day, Luka, not to-day!” she panted. “I could not bear to listen to it now.” She turned without waiting for an answer, and, like the fox when it found that it was free, ran precipitately across the open glade and disappeared among the trees in the direction of the lake.

Her defection was so unexpected that it took him unawares. He stood for a moment listening almost stupidly to the sounds of her hurried flight, which carried to him loudly in the still winter air. Then, with his eagerness and his disappointment written large upon his face, he sprang forward in pursuit and ran madly after her along the trail.

He got no sight of her until he reached the border of the lake, and then it was only to see that she, too, was running and was already far out on the ice toward the middle of the arm. With an exclamation of chagrin he stood still and watched her, and then with a last flicker of hope raised up his hand to his lips and called.

“Lisa!” he cried out. “Come back!” The

appeal went out with the full volume of his voice, and he knew from the distance that she must have heard. But she neither paused nor turned, and he was about to call again when his attention was taken so that he waited with the cry unuttered on his lips.

Loosened by the sun and kept in its place only through lack of a pregnant touch to start it down, the apron of feathery snow, which hung across the steep face of the mountain at the far end of the lake, suddenly took impulse from the vibration of his shout, and, tearing off raggedly in long zigzag lines, began to slip leisurely downward toward the base.

The movement was insignificant at first, but in the twinkling of an eye it gathered force and grew, tumbling the loose banks of snow against one another and rolling them over in constantly increasing heaps. There was no holding the mass when it was half-way down and, sweeping before it the trees and boulders of the lower slopes, it brought them crashing with it to the level of the valley floor. Here at the edge of the water it lay still, a fine white dust of powdered snow rising up from it like a cloud.

But the impact of it did not stop. Moving as

before, it passed out into the lake, with all the force of the snow's tremendous fall. The watching man saw the motion start like a great wave at the shore and move in widening circles out across the ice, keeping always a space ahead of the threatening cloud of mist which followed swiftly in its wake. The ice bent and cracked as it responded to the strain, rising and falling with a swell that was like the sea.

He looked for Lisa Fedorovna and saw that she too had seen the avalanche and was standing still. She seemed to have no thought that it meant danger, and stood gazing at it as if it were a spectacle set out for her to see. But fear came to her almost as he looked, and with a swift glance back and forward in judgment as to which was the nearer shore, she whirled in the trail and began to run toward the farther side.

But for her there was no chance for harbor in the storm. Almost before she was under way, the wave, moving with sinister swiftness, caught her from the side. She made no cry, but Luka Antonovitch saw her stagger, as the swell rose up beneath her feet, and plunge forward, beating wildly with her hands. Then she

pitched headlong down upon the ice, and the following cloud of snow swept over her and blotted out the whole scene from his sight.

It was all so unexpected that the thing reached its climax before it came to him to act. Then, with a cry that had in it the full agony of his fear, he plunged down the shelving bank and ran swiftly out to her along the trail. He met the wave a little distance from the shore, and it threw him sharply from his feet, but, blind to everything except the fate of the woman out beyond him there alone, he struggled up and on, bracing himself to the motion of the ice and fighting hard to keep himself firmly on his legs. The mist about him was so thick that he panted as he breathed it, and he stumbled repeatedly and fell, because he could not see the trail.

He tried in his mind to calculate the distance, so as to know when he reached the spot where Lisa Fedorovna had gone down, and, deciding he was near it, he stood still and called aloud.

"Lisa!" he cried. "Lisa!" and when the mist gave back no answer he went frantically down with his face close to the ground, groping about him for the place where she had fallen in

the way. He was wholly beside himself with the wild rush of his fear.

“If I could only find her,” he said, speaking aloud as if there were some one there to hear. “If I could only find her, and tell her the full truth!”

Presently, however, it came to him that he had surely passed the place where he had seen her fall and, unless the ice had opened up and swallowed her, she must be living and somewhere there beyond. Possessed by this new faith, he began to run, trusting to instinct to keep him in the trail and resting all his hopes on coming quickly to the land. The ice had stood less surely where the swell came near the shore, and going without caution, he did not see and splashed through a lane of water which had opened in the way. It was only to his hips, however, and he pushed on through it to the shore, and coming out stood dripping while he again picked up the trail.

Finding it, he dropped down in the snow, looking for footprints coming from the lake. He found them at once and with a cry of joy went down and touched them as if they held some sacred suggestion of the woman whom he

sought. Then, springing to his feet, he listened for her and, hearing nothing, called aloud.

The cry was but a shadow of his usual full tone, but it was charged with such intensity of desire that it carried almost as far as a more natural outcry would have done. He caught an answer almost as he spoke, and so near he knew that it was only because the mist hung down between them that he could not see her where she stood. With a sob of thankfulness, he plunged forward along the trail in the direction from which the sound had come, and after a moment saw, in the indistinct gray of the distance, her figure rise up before him like a ghost.

She was standing at the great rock where he had stood and watched, before he turned aside to skirt around the arm. It was plain that she had been but little quicker than he upon the way, for she was still panting from the speed that she had made, and, with her hands resting on the stone, was leaning her head upon them as if deadily tired.

Luka Antonovitch reeled unsteadily as he made his way to where she stood. She heard him coming and turned toward him, her hands dropping to her sides. His breath was coming

in quick gasps, and reaching her, he threw his arms around her almost roughly, crushing her to him till he could feel along his whole length the pressure of her body against his.

“Oh, I have found you, I have found you!” he whispered. “I thought it was too late. I wanted to tell you there on the other side, but you would not listen and you went away, and then I thought that you would never know! Let me tell you now before it is too late. I can not live till I have told you. I love you! I love you! Do you hear?” She stood tense and rigid in his clasp, but her eyes were shining and her lips parted slightly with the rapt expression of one who, while he listens, holds his breath.

“I hear,” she breathed almost inaudibly, but she did not move or try to draw away. Then as he waited, anxious and confused, “Go on!” she said. “Tell me! I want to hear!” A quiver ran through his body and he drew her closer to him with almost convulsive touch.

“I love you!” he repeated hoarsely, but his voice was so spent that he was not certain that he spoke aloud. She heard him, however, and laughed a laugh of absolute content. She pushed back from him gently until she had

disengaged her arms. Then drawing closer to him again with the full glory of her happiness shining in her eyes, she put her arms around his neck and, leaning forward, kissed him solemnly upon the lips.

The mist hung over them like a clinging pall, their clothes were wet and clammy, and they stood half to their knees in the cold comfort of the snow. But in the bliss of their mutual confession there was no room for discomfort or fatigue, and looking into each other's eyes they found there, for the time, guaranties that were a pledge against all trouble that their world might dare to bring.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN AT THE TRYST

November days are short, and the winter sun was down and the air sharp with frost before it came to Luka Antonovitch and Lisa Fedorovna to make beginning on their backward way. But the long twilight left for them no doubt as to the trail. The snow had taken a friendly glow from the warm yellow of the sunset clouds and as, reluctant, they set about return, the glamour of their thoughts lay like a seal upon their eyes so that they saw the road with little more distinctness than if it had been a pathway in a dream.

They went along it hand in hand, their pulses thrilling with the intoxicating contact of their palms. It did not seem to be a time for speech, but at intervals they turned to each other with a silent understanding which set their eyes consciously aglow. They had found the peace that follows on the storm, and were grateful for it,

as for an unexpected gift. But yet through it all there never failed to sound for them the still small voice of conscience, reminding them that, though the gates of Paradise stood thus pleasantly ajar, it was not theirs to enter in.

Lisa Fedorovna was the first to answer to its promptings, and while she did not put her misgiving into words, the fear of it showed subtly in her looks, so that in the end the man beside her saw and understood.

“Do not be afraid,” he said with reassuring confidence. “God can not care to hold back from us such comfort as we are taking now, but I am not therefore blind enough to think that because the burden has been eased, He has lifted from us altogether the pressure of His hand.” She caught her breath in a responsive sob, and turned her eyes to him, swimming with sudden tears.

“Oh Luka, if only sometime it could be cleared away!” she cried.

“Peace,” he said hurriedly. “The dead do not come back to life, and until they do we have no right to hope.”

“I did not mean it,” she answered contritely. “What moved me was a longing, not a hope.”

As they came near the hamlet, she was stirred by a new fear.

“Shall you go to see the commandant, Luka?” she asked timidly.

“Yes,” he said, “if it is not too late.” She hesitated as if afraid to make plain even to him her thought, but finally mustered her courage to the point, and said:

“What are you going to tell him—about to-day?”

“The truth,” he answered laconically.

“That is right,” she said faintly, and went on as before. He watched her sympathetically, and tightened his grasp upon her hand.

“Pavel Pavelovitch will understand,” he said confidently, and there was a reassuring certainty in his voice which bolstered her wavering confidence almost to belief. But later, when Luka Antonovitch came to talk to the commandant about the matter, face to face, he found he was not by any means so sure.

Pavel Kolomin listened gravely and without comment to the tale, puffing at his pipe, and watching the embarrassed messenger narrowly from between his half closed eyes. When the story was all told, he still sat blowing out clouds

of smoke, his face set inscrutably, so that it gave no reflection of what was going on inside.

“Well, there is no doubt but you have brought me news,” he said at last, “though I must say that it is not altogether what I expected you would bring. It is perhaps better this way than if it had been done by one of Konovalof’s men. It is a pity that you are not a peasant so you could go to your wife and settle this matter with a stick. But even if you can not, you owe it to the Company to come to such an agreement with her that the thing will not occur again. And as to that,” he added thoughtfully, “is this the first time that she has tampered with the traps?” The man addressed stirred uneasily.

“I can not say,” he answered in a low voice. “I did not think to ask.” The commandant’s eyebrows lifted, and he made a slight clucking noise with his tongue.

“That was a mistake,” he said slowly. “You know that it is not the first time that the animals have disappeared.”

“I know it,” returned the abashed messenger dejectedly, but to which of the two facts his knowledge ran was not plain. His chagrin,

however, was so genuine that the commandant could not but believe that the man personally had had no criminal part in the dereliction of which he made report, and he gave up the interrogation with a shrug.

“You are a good man, Luka,” he said helplessly, “and I suspect your wife is as honest in her way as you. But the things you do and the way you tell about them would convict you with any one except a friend, so I advise you to allow this matter to remain between you and me. Go back to-morrow and reset the traps before any one reports them in; and that is the last you will hear of the thing unless I find later that your wife was really acting for the other post.” Luka Strukof’s face grew full of gratitude, but involuntarily he made as if he would defend Lisa Fedorovna from the aspersion of the other’s final words. Pavel Kolomin, however, did not wait for him to speak.

“Not so fast!” he cried. “You should not take offense because I consider every chance. Be honest now. How long had you known Lisa Fedorovna before she came to you as a wife?” The color faded out of Luka Strukof’s face and he swallowed vigorously before he spoke.

“It was not long,” he said huskily, struggling for composure.

“That is what I thought,” returned the commandant quietly. “Now, was there no one else at that time who wanted her as much as you?” Luka Strukof’s eyes showed that he wanted to make denial, but he was too bad an actor to compass anything besides the truth.

“Yes—there was one,” he breathed. The commandant nodded and threw up his hand.

“There you have it then,” he cried triumphantly. “What is there to hinder that the man has followed her as far as the other post?” Luka Antonovitch was evidently not impressed by this logic, for his tension relaxed, and he spoke with more composure than before.

“I can not think it,” he said. “Lisa Fedorovna sees no person from the Kenai post.” Pavel Kolomin gravely nodded his head.

“I trust you are right,” he said soberly. “The odds are against you, and for that reason, if for no other, I honor you for your belief. If I had quarreled with a wife as attractive as yours, and had no means of knowing what she did away from home, I am afraid that I should not be so sure.” Luka Strukof’s jaw

set grimly and he looked the commandant squarely in the eyes. But the other man did not flinch.

"I will be her conscience," he said doggedly. "You may put her punishment on me, if you find that I am wrong."

When he reached the house at the gate he found Lisa Fedorovna waiting for him in the dark outside the door. When she heard him, she came forward with a sudden rush and, feeling for him, took hold upon his arm.

"Did you find the commandant?" she demanded breathlessly. "Did you tell him? What did he say?" He put his hand reassuringly on hers and pressed it gently as he made reply.

"I saw him, yes," he said. "He was good to me, as he always is—and I think he understands." She fairly shook him in her impatience for his news.

"Tell me exactly what he said," she cried. "I want to hear every word!" He went over the interview for her as succinctly as he could, sparing no detail of the commandant's suspicion except the suggestion that perhaps she had wandered in her love, and dwelling almost with

reverence on Pavel Kolomin's kindly sympathy and trust.

"But, you see, there was the one question that I could not answer," he said as he approached the end. "For I had never asked you if this was the only time that you had touched the traps."

"There was no other," she broke in hurriedly. "It was an impulse, Luka, and I did not stop to think."

"I was certain of it, but Pavel Pavelovitch wanted the exact truth, and so I only told him what I knew."

"He was right, Luka. If, as he thinks, the traps have been robbed before, it was no doubt done by Konovalof's men, and it is not unnatural that in Pavel Pavelovitch's mind the charge should lodge that in their doings I, too, had a part."

"But you did not," he urged impulsively. "Surely you never let them persuade you into that!" He felt her stiffen at the implication and she gave a stifled cry.

"Did you then believe it true?" she said. "Let me tell you then, once for all, that I have had absolutely nothing to do with those people,

beyond that I have seen them sometimes in the woods.”

“Then you did see them? Why did you not report them to the post?”

“They were doing no harm,” she answered, “and I was so far from the life here that I did not know the danger of their presence or that I ought to tell. And as for that matter,” she added tremulously, “I do not think, Luka, that either you or I have been looking for acquaintances we did not have to make.”

“True,” he answered. “Nor will we in the days to come. Give me your word that you will avoid all meeting with them from this time.”

“Gladly,” she said, “if it will make you one jot happier in your mind. It should be plain to you that I have no wish to see or be seen by any one from the life we left behind.”

She gave the promise honestly and without thought that it would prove a care to keep. The new understanding with Luka Antonovitch, though it could not break down the wall of moral conviction which kept the couple from each other’s arms, spread like a balm over the sore surface of Lisa Fedorovna’s sensitiveness and pride, and gave her courage to look more

normally on life. She knew now that she was loved by Luka Strukof even as she loved him and, sure of this fact, it did not seem so much to matter that without recourse they must deny themselves the rest, and walk apart.

All day the joy of the discovery went singing in her heart and her accustomed round of homely tasks took on a new and magnified significance. The hours became too short for the performance of her household drudgeries of love. She plunged into their doing with an eagerness that left no room for the old loneliness and care, and, from being a wanderer in the hills and woods, she became a willing tenant in the narrow kingdom bounded by the four walls of her home.

But there are some lives whose most innocent and pleasant paths lead but to tragedy, and the time came when Lisa Fedorovna, made unsuspecting of danger by the certainty that her intentions were beyond reproach, stepped outside this enchanted realm of happiness and peace and broke the promise she had made to Luka Antonovitch because she thought it for his good.

It was Sara Lukievna who unconsciously

led her on. The girl had noted with honest joy the increased span of her stepmother's happiness, and while she was puzzled that, after apparent reconciliation, the two she loved still stood apart, she was grateful that even this partial understanding had been reached, and disported herself in frank enjoyment in the happier atmosphere of the home.

If she had been drawn to her stepmother in her darker moods, she came absolutely to adore her now, and with the development in her of this new admiration and respect she began to open to the older woman's view shy vistas of her more intimate and inner thoughts.

At first the door shut so quickly that Lisa Fedorovna caught little more than glimpses of the enchanted land beyond. But the stepmother was wise in her generation and never urged the girl to confidences she did not wish to give. And so, unconsciously, the permitted outlooks broadened, new shutters were unlocked and pushed aside, and quite naturally there fell away from the girl the cloak of reticence which nature has set up in all girls to hide the soul of maidenhood from life.

The confidence which proved particular was

proffered on the morning of a blustering, gusty day, when the windows shook and were never silent, and the icy air, driven by the impulse of the fierce pressure outside, leaked in at every crevice, so that there was no warm place in the house except on the seat above the stove.

On one end of this Sara Lukievna had curled herself up like a luxurious cat and was absently watching Lisa Fedorovna, as she put the finishing touches on her morning's work. The older woman went tranquilly from task to task, content with her own thoughts, and scarcely glancing at the indolent figure of the girl above her on the shelf.

But when the room was cleared, and everything straightened and made right, she folded her cotton apron and took the cloth off from her hair and, climbing up beside Sara Lukievna, stretched herself at full length and let her head down on the other's knees. The girl stirred slightly to readjust her comfort and lifting an arm laid it caressingly about the older woman's face. Lisa Fedorovna turned her head and kissed Sara Lukievna's fingers as they came against her lips.

"I wish care sat on me as easily as it does on

you," she said enviously. "You never seem to have a trouble in your life." The girl opened her eyes and smiled absently, and gave Lisa Fedorovna a quick pressure with her encircling arm.

"You do not know," she said softly, and then she sighed. Lisa Fedorovna remained very still and let no sign of her interest escape her, though her lids went down over her eyes so that the girl should not see them smile. Sara Lukievna's glance remained pensively fixed and she considered meditatively with tight-pressed lips. Presently she said:

"Lisa, you have been in love. How do you know when a man really cares?" It was the old question asked in the old way, but the perennial freshness of passion breathed in it, as it always has, and Lisa Fedorovna felt the exquisite breath of it play round her as she heard.

"It is not so hard," she said. "Generally you can tell from the way he looks at you and the feeling in his voice."

"Oh, those ways, of course!" said Sara Lukievna vaguely. "But I mean when he does not, and is just slow and friendly, and yet you know there is something, but he forgets the

things you give him and does not seem to notice when you dance with him and your head rests against his coat." The older woman restrained her desire to turn and see the other's face, but her hand went up and she patted softly the hand that was against her cheek.

"Perhaps that is his way," she said with ready sympathy. "Has he then never told you that he cares?"

"No. Not that one—yet." The joy that every woman finds in conquest, even though it is not her own, stirred in Lisa Fedorovna, so that she had difficulty in keeping her interest from showing in her voice.

"Not that one?" she repeated. "And how many others are there, then, that have?"

"Oh, only one!" replied the girl promptly. "That is, only one that counts." Lisa Fedorovna waited patiently, content to let her unfold her confidence in her own way. Sara Lukievna, however, was too intent on her self-analysis easily to take alarm, and after a moment's pondering she said:

"You know I have known the other one a long time. It was before Thoma Kolomin came." The name dropped out unconsciously

and the girl stopped with a sudden guilty flush. But the older woman's face remained placid as before, and noting the girl's embarrassment she made haste to help her out.

"If you are sure of the one," she said gently, "why are you so concerned as to whether Thoma Kolomin cares or not?"

"Of course," said the girl slowly. "But don't you know, when a man is different, like that, you can not help wanting to find out." Lisa Fedorovna smiled in spite of herself and, lifting her head, drew herself about till her face was close to that of the recumbent girl.

"And if you did," she whispered, "would it really make a difference to you?" A lovely flood of color swept up into Sara Lukievna's face and with a swift movement she gathered her stepmother in her arms.

"Perhaps," she said shyly. "I am not sure. But, anyway, I should really like to know." Lisa Fedorovna let her hold her without interruption till the first flush of her embarrassment was past. Then she drew back her head and looked smilingly into the other's eyes.

"Tell me about the other one," she said. "Is it anybody that I know?" It was easy to

see that Sara Lukievna's interest in this case was different from that she displayed toward the commandant's son. Her face cleared at the question and she spoke at once and without constraint.

"I do not think that you have seen him," she said. "His name is Akim Nazaroff. He is of the hunters and since you came he has not been here at the house."

"But how do you still see him, then, that you are able to keep track of how he feels?"

"It is not so hard," she answered. "You see, he began to be with me when I lived with Akoulina Fedosyevna and she let him come with the others to the great house. Now that he is away so much I only see him when he is at the post. If it does not snow," she volunteered softly, "I expect he will be here this afternoon." A new note sounded in Lisa Fedorovna's voice.

"But where are you going to meet him?" she said. "Are you expecting to bring him here?"

"Oh, dear no," said the girl. "We always go to the storehouse by the discovery cross beyond the landing cove." Lisa Fedorovna's voice remained as colorless as before, but there

was a certain precision about it that spoke of a reserve.

“But you have not been going there to meet him alone!” she said. The girl’s quick ear caught the deprecating inflection and she made haste to set the matter right.

“Not all the time,” she said apologetically. “Masha has gone with me when she could.” Lisa Fedorovna received the confession with a smile.

“It is not a good plan, dear,” she said. “You should not do a thing like that without taking counsel with some one else.”

“But it was not wrong to me, Lisa,” urged the girl eagerly, “and, besides, who was there that I could go to for advice?” The truth of her defense came sharply home to the older woman and she drew the girl to her with a twinge of shame.

“I have been selfishly bound up in my own affairs,” she said, “and perhaps, too, a little fearful that you would not want me to stand in such matters in your real mother’s place. But I have not meant to hold myself aloof and I would have loved to have you come to me at any time.” The girl made no spoken answer, but

pressed close to the older woman and drew her tight. They held each other thus while the new bond became tacitly complete and then Sara Lukievna brought the matter back to its more concrete form.

"About this afternoon," she said. "Do you think I ought not to go?" Lisa Fedorovna freed herself and sat up on the couch.

"Do you want to go?" she asked with a smile.

"Of course. I am afraid, if I do not, he will not understand." Lisa Fedorovna considered.

"Well," she said doubtfully, "I suppose, if you have promised, you really ought to go, but I do not think you ought to go alone."

"Come with me then," cried the girl promptly. "It is not so far, and you will have the chance to see him for yourself." There was a promise of adventure in the prospect that appealed to Lisa Fedorovna's heart, and, besides, she was pleased that the girl had so readily accepted her proffered will to help. She waited a moment to give the matter a proper sense of being judged and then without looking at her companion said:

"I am afraid it will be cold, but if you really

wish it I will go.” The girl was frankly happy in the consent. She was impatient of the time till they could be upon the way, and moved about the house with a restless lightness that permeated even her more sedate companion with something of her festive air.

They set out from the house with great preparation and much laughter, passing out of the stockade into the open woods and bearing off toward the shoulder of the overshadowing ridge. Sara Lukievna promptly took charge of the excursion and chattered steadily and confidentially of her own affairs. Lisa Fedorovna found interest and amusement in the talk and listened without making answers till some particular frivolity suggested a question to her mind.

“Thoma Pavelovitch,” she said when there was a convenient pause, “does he know that you come out here to meet this other man?” Sara Lukievna looked softly round at the questioner and there was a suspicion of a twinkle in her eyes.

“I do not know that he does,” she said demurely. “At least he has never told me that he did.” She stopped short with her fingers on

her lips, as if a thought had suddenly come to her, and after a moment said, with eyes that still had their wicked little smile, "I wonder if it might not be a good thing to tell him. Perhaps it would help him to make up his mind."

They came out on the shoulder of the hill and found the storehouse just below them at their feet. Sara Lukievna stopped and stood looking out across the broad stretch of frozen river that lay like a white plain beyond.

"I see him," she cried excitedly. "I was sure that he would come!" Lisa Fedorovna followed the direction of her pointing and saw on the ice, some little distance down, two figures advancing from the other shore. For a moment her heart-beat quickened to an excitement joyous as the girl's. But as she remembered the post behind her and the men's direction of advance, an uneasiness awoke in her which suddenly made her grave.

"Why are they so far down the river?" she said. "They must have gone a long way around."

"Oh, no," returned the girl. "It is almost straight across and by keeping down the stream no one sees them from the post." Then Lisa

Fedorovna's suspicion crystallized into conviction as she heard.

"Sara," she said, "those men are not coming from the other post?"

"Why, yes," the girl answered. "I thought you understood."

"No, I did not. You know the commandant has forbidden us to have any intercourse with the blockhouse men." The girl shrugged her shoulders and threw off the responsibility with a laugh.

"Pavel Pavelovitch is a dear," she said lightly. "He never expects me to obey his rules."

"But, Sara, how can you, when you know that it may make trouble for the post?"

"Where is the harm possible?" she protested. "I used to meet Akim Nazaroff without danger to the public before the order was given, and the things we say to each other now are just the same as we used to say then. We do not talk about politics," she added demurely. But Lisa Fedorovna was not to be convinced.

"Well, I can not meet them, anyway," she said. "I have given Luka my solemn promise that I will not."

“Oh!” said the girl with genuine regret. “I wanted you so much to see what he was like. Well, come with me anyway as far as the storehouse door,” she added coaxingly. “You can wait there as well as here, without breaking your word, and yet you will be near enough to get some idea of how he looks.” She seized her reluctant stepmother by the hand and set off with her down the hill. Lisa Fedorovna allowed herself to be led along, though it was evident that her pleasure in the adventure was all gone.

“Not a step farther!” she said when the doorway had been reached, and Sara Lukievna obediently let go her hand. The two men were now quite near, and seeing Sara Lukievna coming on alone, they paused a moment in close talk. Then one of them turned and moved away among the trees and the other, whom Lisa Fedorovna guessed to be Akim Nazaroff, moved forward again almost at a run and came to Sara Lukievna with outstretched hands.

She evidently spoke to him in quick warning, for his arms dropped at his sides and he stood to look at Lisa Fedorovna with a frankly curious air. She dropped as promptly from his

mind, however, and he turned again to give his whole attention to the girl. The couple was plainly visible from the angle of the building where she stood, and Lisa Fedorovna embraced the opportunity that the girl had made for her to study the young man as he talked.

He was a close-knit, lithe, young fellow, agile as a cat, and had the swarthy skin and black eyes that come from the Ukraine. He was evidently very much devoted to the girl before him, and pleaded his cause with an oriental abandon of gracefulness and fire. Lisa Fedorovna watched their doings closely, her attention bent on gaining ocular proof of the range of Sara Lukievna's interest in the man. So absorbed did she become that she kept no note of what was going on behind her and had no thought of danger, till suddenly there was a voice in her ear, an arm slid round her waist, and she was pulled back till she was round the corner of the house and it hid the others from her view.

"Ai, Masha!" said the voice with a hoarse chuckle. "So I am not so displeasing but you did come after all!" Lisa Fedorovna's lips refused to speak, but she twisted herself from the

embrace and, whirling, faced the intruder with fear and indignation blazing in her eyes. It was the man who had come with Akim Nazaroff from the other side, and he saw his mistake the moment it was made.

“My death has already come for me!” he said with lowered eyes and an awkward carrying of his hand up to his cap. “I thought it was Masha, the maid, whom I have found here before.” Lisa Fedorovna was not mollified and was about to answer with rebuke, but as the man straightened himself, their eyes met and they stood gazing at each other in startled recognition and surprise. Neither broke the silence, but after a little the woman’s eyes went down. The man’s face broadened into a grin of satisfaction and he chuckled as if there was a real pleasure for him in the discovery he had made.

“So it is here that you have come!” he said. “I thought perhaps I should find you somewhere on the coast.” She shrank a little at his familiarity, but seemed to find no special word to say.

“Where is the other one?” he demanded finally. “Did you bring him with you, too?”

Still she did not speak, but, seeing that he would wait and was bent upon an answer, she forced herself to make a faint motion of assent.

“I thought as much,” he said with a knowing waggle of his head. “One does not shake the plum-tree and forget to pick up the plums.” He looked her up and down with an insolence of admiration that fairly made her shrink.

“God!” he said with a glow of reminiscence shining in his eyes. “That was a great time when I saw you last! It was worth all it cost, and Luka Antonovitch did not do more for you than I would have done, if I had been in his place.” She still persisted in her silence, though her eyes sought his in an agony of pleading and she flushed furiously up to the roots of her hair. The man waited until it was plain that she either could not or would not speak, and then began again.

“Well, what is it?” he said contemptuously. “Have you entirely lost your tongue?” Lisa Fedorovna struggled until she made her lips obey her, though her voice was so low that he could scarcely hear.

“What are you going to do?” she whispered. He looked sharply at her with a sudden shrewd

calculation, and for the moment he forgot to grin. Then a quick gleam of understanding came into his eyes, and quite naturally he resumed his air of careless nonchalance.

“That, I think, will depend on which course promises to be most profitable to me,” he said smoothly. She understood him, but she was so much afraid of him she did not dare to let her indignation show.

“But I have so little that you could want!” she said helplessly.

“No doubt,” he answered with mock sympathy. “But perhaps—if it were worth it—there might be some one thing.”

“And if I found it,” she said, “you would promise to say nothing to the people here—to let Luka Antonovitch go in peace?”

“Who can doubt it?” he said with a fine air of sincerity. “Why should I wish to do you harm?” She leaned against the storehouse wall and covered her face with her hands. All the heartsickness and fear that had shadowed her since she last saw this man, came up before her, and she realized with despairing hopelessness how futile had been the struggle that she and Luka Antonovitch had made.

“I will pay!” she cried bitterly. “You shall have what there is, Ivan Ignatich, but you will have to give me time.”

“To be sure,” he said. “All things can not be done in a day. But mark you, my dear, no word of this to Luka Antonovitch, or to anybody else. I will match my silence against yours, and for the same length of time.”

“It will be harder,” she said, “but I will try.” He nodded satisfaction and she put up her hand.

“Go!” she cried. “I can not talk further about it now!”

“Very well,” he assented. “But when shall I see you here again?”

“To-morrow. No—in two days.” The world had been growing black around her as she spoke, and she scarcely heard whether he answered her or even understood. Her body began to sway dizzily back and forth, her head drooped as if she were asleep, and before the man woke to her condition and could lift his hand to help, her consciousness deserted her and she slipped quietly down along the wall into the snow.

The man made a motion as if to lift her up,

but hesitated, listened, and then went cautiously to the corner of the house where he could make sure of Akim Nazaroff and the girl. They were just parting and he saw that there would be no time for ministration, if he was to retire without being seen. But as he passed the prostrate woman, coming back, some impulse of recollection brought him to a pause. He stood looking at her curiously for a moment and then turned her over with his foot so that he could the better see her face.

“God, but she was worth it!” he cried with a sudden glow of admiration; and letting her fall back, he swung jauntily away from her out into the shelter of the trees, moving by instinct along the path by which he had first come.

CHAPTER VIII

THOMAS GOES A-WOOING

It was not an easy task which Lisa Fedorovna had set herself to do. Her conscience pricked her with a two-edged pang, whenever the thought came to her of her silence and deceit. But the fear for Luka Antonovitch gripped her with so strong a hold that she shut her eyes to all except his threatened danger and grudged no sacrifice which might raise a shield to stand between him and the expected blow.

“When he knows, he will understand,” she said to herself softly and, with no support but this unstable staff, she began to climb the rising grade of Ivan Ignatich’s demands. The amount on which she privately could count was so pitifully small that, when she went to him with it, her heart sank lest he should scorn it and refuse to carry out his bond. But the man was much too ripe a villain to flout a likely

goose because the first egg of the clutch proved undersized.

“That is not so bad—for two days,” he said cheerfully, with a calculating eye on the money. “But for the next time, perhaps you had better wait a week.”

“A week!” she echoed. “In a year I could not bring to you so much again! This is the last kopeck that I have.”

“That is a shame,” he said slowly with a well-assumed air of sympathy. “But money is not the only thing in the world. You see, I am fond of clothes and trinkets, and there is always a fair market at the post for skins.” She looked at him dully, as if she found the matter hard to understand.

“I can not! This will have to do,” she said stubbornly.

“Oh, you will find something,” he insisted. “Surely this weather is too cold for your man to begin a journey back. We ought at least to try and hold him here until the spring.” But Lisa Fedorovna could not be made to promise, and, in going, left him uncertain what she proposed to do. Indeed, in the days which followed, Ivan Ignatich’s plan was more than once

perilously near to shipwreck in the wild whirl of her bitterness and despair.

The one thing which remained to comfort her was that in the base demands which her inquisitor imposed upon her, he urged no sacrifice which infringed upon her personal respect. A certain insolent admiration of her charms was always present in his look; but either because the approaches seemed too well guarded to be taken by assault, or else that he preferred, for the time at least, to concentrate upon the prospect of pecuniary gain, the man restrained desire at the expense of greed, and laid no claim either by word or deed upon her personal regard. It was evident that the taint was in his mind, however, for when the chance came to express the feeling where he would not have to urge it face to face, he did not hesitate to give his imagination rein.

It stormed on the day appointed for the second tryst, and Lisa Fedorovna guessed that not even his cupidity would tempt the man abroad. Whether she would have gone to meet him if it had been clear, she did not settle even with herself. It was enough, for the time, that the need for decision came and passed, and she

went on stolidly, nerving herself to meet the further crisis when it should arrive.

She had no word of trouble for three uneasy days. Then, at an hour when Sara Lukievna and Luka Antonovitch were both away, there was a knock at the door and a strange man greeted her when she opened to his call.

"You are Lisa Fedorovna, who lives here in the house at the gate?" he asked with a furtive glance beyond her through the door.

"Yes," she said faintly. The man fumbled a moment in the pocket of his blouse.

"Here is a letter," he said, "which Ivan Ignatich instructed me to place privately in your hand." She took it mechanically, trying to think of some germane word to say. But the man was fearful and had no wish to wait.

"There is no answer," he said; "you will find from the letter what Ivan Ignatich expects."

"I will read it," she said and the man, with a duck of his head and another uneasy glance in through the door, slipped stealthily round the angle of the house and disappeared through the open gate of the stockade.

For a moment Lisa Fedorovna stood without

motion, looking stupidly at the letter in her hand. Then, even though she knew that she was alone, she hid the paper furtively in her bosom, before she ventured to go back into the house. The same fear held her, once she was inside, and it was only in the security of her own room that she dared again to draw the letter out and feverishly break the seal. The missive was short and to the point; but before she finished it, her face was red and her eyes blazing with the confusion of her shame.

“My dear,” it ran. “I have cursed the saints that the storm kept me from looking again into your pretty eyes. You will understand how much I have missed what I would have had from you if I had met you yesterday as I did before. It is meat and drink and inspiration that you bring me all in one. Come to me Thursday without fail. Bring me what you can and I will not be behind, in return, with the sweet assurances you crave. Is it not wonderful we each can bring such comfort to the other’s heart! Come, my love, and I will tell you again that the plan goes well and there are still things between us that neither your man nor that old fool Pavel Kolomin know.”

The craft of the man, his ingenuity in saying one thing when he meant another, and above all the impudent assumption of interest between them such that, if the letter should be taken, it would appear that their meetings had been simple trysts of love,—all these things stirred her with a mad confusion which fairly took away her power to think.

“It is too much!” she cried bitterly. “Luka must decide this matter for himself.” Then the pendulum swung back, and like a picture there began to unfold before her all that would happen if she displeased this villain who was harrying her, and he made good his repeated threat of charging Luka Antonovitch before the post.

“Luka would kill him if he knew,” she said, and nerved herself again to face the possibility of compliance with Ivan Ignatich’s demands. But the only certainty that came to her from it all was that there was no clear guiding lamp to show her how she should decide. She was still sitting with the letter in her hand, when there was the jar of an opening door outside and the noise of a footstep in the adjoining room, and with a sudden panic she realized that Sara

Lukievna had returned and was near her in the house.

With a quick rush she bent down to a chest which was the repository of her most private and intimate effects and, opening it, thrust the letter into it so that, for the time at least, it was safely hid. Then, as her courage grew, she threw back the lock softly and, passing quietly out, met the girl with a smile which hid effectually the trouble that was gnawing at her heart. Sara Lukievna's eyes were shining and she came at once to Lisa Fedorovna and stood before her with a mysteriously confidential air.

"I have made up my mind," she said softly. "I am not going to the warehouse any more." In spite of her preoccupation the older woman's eyes lit sympathetically, and she regarded the girl with a kindly interest and surprise.

"Then you are certain now which one you want?" she said. The girl nodded shyly, a flush of color rising in her cheeks.

"And Thoma Pavelovitch—" went on Lisa Fedorovna inquiringly. "Has he, too, then, made up his mind?" Sara Lukievna hesitated just a moment, as if to be certain she was delivering the whole truth.

“No, not yet,” she said naïvely, “but he will this afternoon.” Lisa Fedorovna was a little taken aback by the other’s unexpected show of certainty and, when she answered, it was with a disapproving motion of the head.

“It is good to be sure,” she said; “but would it not be better to wait till Thoma Pavelovitch has actually told you what he thinks?” Sara Lukievna misunderstood.

“Of course, if you think best,” she said slowly, “I can keep up with Akim Nazarovitch until things are absolutely sure. But, really, whatever happens, Lisa, I do not believe that I should ever want him now.” Lisa Fedorovna laughed in spite of herself.

“I did not mean that,” she said. “What I was thinking was that it might be a sorrow for you sometime if, feeling sure, things did not come out for you as you wished.”

“Oh, but it is sure, Lisa,” protested the girl earnestly. “Thoma is all right. The only trouble with him is that he does not quite know how.” Lisa Fedorovna bent and kissed her and drew her to her with her arms.

“I am glad for your sake that it is so,” she said. “Thoma Kolomin is a good man, and if

I had decided for you I could not have made a better choice." The girl gave her a quick, grateful hug.

"Is it not lovely!" she whispered. "I do not deserve it, Lisa. It makes me almost ashamed." But the older woman, being less sentimentally absorbed, was busy figuring on the practical detail.

"Thoma's father and mother,—" she said. "Have you told them yet?"

"Why, no," cried the girl. "You know, Lisa, that Thoma has not yet even definitely told me!"

"Of course. But what will happen when they are told?" The girl's face grew thoughtful and then she laughed.

"I should just like to see Pavel Pavelovitch object," she said with mock severity. "And as for Akoulina Fedosyevna, she never denies Thoma anything he wants."

"That makes it easier, of course," returned the older woman soberly. "But you had better keep the news from Akoulina Fedosyevna until you are sure that Thoma Pavelovitch really holds you as a need."

"Oh, I had no idea of telling her or anybody

else," cried the girl hastily. "You see, when I saw you, Lisa, I had just made up my mind and I had to tell somebody, and with you it was different from the rest."

Sara Lukievna was entirely honest in her intention of keeping her purposes in relation to Thoma Kolomin entirely to herself. But before the cause came to issue, she used her privilege and changed her mind and with premeditation included his father in her confidence, because she decided she needed him in the preparation of her case. That the judgment, when reached, would be in her favor, was never for a moment doubtful in her mind. But she was too much interested to leave to chance even a detail which could be prearranged, and besides, being young, there were thrills in preparing the thing properly which appealed to her artistic sense.

As a first step, therefore, she arrayed herself in her most becoming clothes, and she was a vision bewitching enough to wheedle any man, when she came in on Pavel Kolomin at the great house, as he was resting himself after the labors of the afternoon. He had on a loose jacket and had slipped off his boots and was lounging

in his chair, with the bottoms of his feet flattened comfortably against the stove. He dropped them to the floor as she came in and with a smile put out his hand. She came to him at once, and without waiting for invitation perched herself beside him on the broad arm of his chair.

“What are you trying to do?” she said, pointing to his other hand.

“Mending my spectacles,” he answered without looking up. She watched him curiously while he spliced the bridge with a strip of copper wire and clumsily wound the break with a waxed thread. Then, without warning, she leaned suddenly forward and kissed him on the top of his head.

“You are not wearing well, little father,” she said warningly. “It is getting very pink here at the top.” She ran the ends of her fingers lightly over the patch of thinner hair and an involuntary shiver ran down the old man’s back.

“Why should I wear well?” he said with a bluff pretense of complaint. “It is a lesson youth has to learn, my child, that experiences are not acquired without paying every kopeck

they are worth. I have been collecting them now for over sixty years, and my only wonder is that I have any hair left at all." The girl slipped an arm around his neck.

"Poor little father!" she said consolingly. "And is it then so bad, now that I am no longer here to help you with your work?" Pavel Pavelovitch submitted patiently, holding his spectacles carefully to one side till she should see fit to finish her caress.

"One's children always go away, I suppose," he said with a sentimental sigh. "It is one of the things one gets for being old." The girl tightened her grasp on the commandant's neck and put down her head till her cheek rested against his hair.

"Would you be glad, little father, if I should tell you that I was coming back to live with you again?" she said softly. Pavel Pavelovitch could not free himself, but he sat stiffly upright.

"What is that? What is that?" he demanded in his loud judicial tone. "You say that you are coming back here to live?"

"Perhaps," she whispered. The old man's eyes began to twinkle and the grim lines in his face relaxed.

“Oh, that Thoma!” he cried with a sudden illuminating swell of pride. “Is he not a very devil of a man?” He unloosened the girl’s arms from about his neck, and pulling her round in front of him, held her so that he could see her face.

“When did this happen? Why have I not been told?” he demanded, as if she were a prisoner on trial for her life. The girl wriggled vainly to be free, and in a confusion of blushes finally brought her eyes to his.

“How could I tell you, little father?” she said with appealing earnestness. “You see, the difficulty—it is one of those things which is surely going to happen, but which has not happened yet.”

Pavel Pavelovitch looked at her blankly for a moment and then he laughed suddenly aloud.

“Well, it will happen then!” he cried. “I would stake my head on it, if you have made up your mind!” He let his hands slip down to Sara Lukievna’s wrists, and drew her back again beside him on the chair.

“Let us talk about this,” he said with assumed gravity. “As I understand it, Thoma knows what he wants and you know what he

wants, but he has not told you yet what he wants. Is that it?" The girl nodded.

"Then what is the matter with the man that he does not speak out?" burst out the commandant impatiently. "I never would have had such trouble at his age."

"Thoma is all right, little father," urged the girl loyally. "Only he is not quite so quick a man as you."

"Bah!" he grunted. "Let me get hold of him once and we shall see how he will move." The girl snuggled down closer against him with a satisfied indrawing of her breath.

"Oh, if you would!" she cried breathlessly.

"I will!" maintained the old man stoutly. "Just tell me what it is that you want said."

"Oh, nothing to him!" broke in the girl hurriedly. "I would not have you do that for the world! But there is another way in which you can help us, if you will. You see, it would have been settled long before this if we had had a real chance. Thoma is not quick and each time before he gets to the proper place some one has always come in and spoiled it all. I thought that perhaps this afternoon—after dinner, you know, when it is quiet and beginning to grow

dark—you could manage it with the matka so that we should have a little time alone. You manage her so well, you know,” she added with insidious flattery. Pavel Kolomin’s brows went up and he considered silently before he spoke.

“I think perhaps I would rather speak to Thoma,” he said a little ruefully.

“Oh, you need not tell her anything about it,” interposed the girl earnestly. “It is only to keep her doing something else, so that we can have the half-hour to ourselves.”

“Very well,” said the commandant with a return to his rotund official voice. “But let it not be for a minute longer than that time.”

Sara Lukievna gave him a sudden squeeze and tilting up his chin kissed him squarely on the lips.

“You are a dear!” she whispered, and before Pavel Pavelovitch could recover from the attack, she had sprung from her perch and fled lightly from the room. The commandant sat for some moments communing peacefully with himself.

“Dear, dear!” he said. “It seems only yesterday that I was teaching that boy to walk!”

Stooping, he felt for his spectacles, which had fallen to the floor, and after a thoughtful examination of the half-mended bridge he placed them absent-mindedly on a shelf and set out on a pilgrimage up-stairs.

He could hear Sara Lukievna singing a gay little song in the kitchen as he went, and he stopped on the stairs and listened to her with a knowing shake of the head. When he reached his wife, the importance of his news had filled him almost to bursting and he stood to impart it eagerly, with a wide-eyed foolish smile upon his face.

"Akoulina, Thoma is going to marry Sara Lukievna," he announced without warning. The old lady could not forbear a squeak of interest, though for the sake of family discipline she managed to control her face.

"You are like a salt cone in a window, Pavel," she said sharply. "You pick up everything that comes in the house."

"No, no. It is true!" he protested. "Sara just told me so herself." His earnestness routed her disbelief. She stood up breathless, facing him with a sudden tension, and he saw in her eyes the birth of the half-guilty look which

clearly proclaimed her a partner with him in conviction of the matter's truth. She came a step nearer, and he put his arm around her with a tenderness that stirred her to an unaccustomed thrill. She yielded stiffly, while the realization of his tidings sank completely in; and then with a sigh of content she laid her cheek against his arm.

"Is it not lovely?" she whispered. He gave a half-breathed assent and for a moment they clung together as shyly as if the joy of this new love had been their own. Then the old lady remembered she had had no word of the betrothal beyond the naked fact and demanded corroboration at her husband's hands.

The commandant was garrulously glad to tell but, as he proceeded, an embarrassment seized him lest his wife should consider that his announcement of the matter had been premature. He temporized, therefore, as he could, gilding the unpleasant vagueness of the truth and avoiding with such conscious effort all definite committal, as to time and place, that the old lady guessed intuitively there was something he was striving to conceal.

"What!" she said when he was done.

“You say he has never asked her to be his wife?”

“No,” admitted the commandant feebly, “but he will this afternoon.”

“Then why,” she demanded tragically, with a passionate outwave of her hands, “why did you come to me and say they were betrothed?” The commandant shrank sheepishly before her wrath, and cleared his throat with a deprecating cough.

“I suppose,” he said humbly, “it was because when Sara told me, she seemed so sure.” The old lady gave herself up to a very whirlwind of wrath.

“Oh, what a man it is!” she cried ironically. “A girl tells him she is going to be betrothed to-morrow, and the simple one goes gaily around announcing it to-day. Sara is a minx. She should wait till she is asked. It is not proper beforehand for a girl to be so sure!” She trotted impatiently over to her dressing-table and began emphatically picking up the articles upon it and arranging them in place. Her husband watched her with crestfallen look.

“It is only until this afternoon, you know,” he urged dejectedly.

“Only till this afternoon, is it?” she repeated. “Well, we shall see about this afternoon! Why do you stand there like a statue on a stone?” she burst out furiously. “Go away, so that I can get something on me and go down.”

The commandant obeyed meekly and left the room. But at the head of the stairs outside, he halted, and stood looking ruefully back. His animation was all gone, and his consciousness was dismally busy with what was to happen when his wife descended on the unsuspecting girl down-stairs.

He listened for some sound of Sara Lukievna, but she had finished with her singing and the house was forbiddingly, almost solemnly, still. His depression deepened as he tried in his anxiety to formulate a remedy for the blunder he had made, but he could think of nothing better than to wait and waylay Akoulina Fedosyevna and try her temper when she should be dressed.

And here she found him thirty minutes later, sitting on a step in a dejected heap, his elbows on his knees and his chin set soberly between his hands. He rose at the first sound of her

coming and faced her with an air of apology which changed to one of blank surprise as he saw how she was dressed.

She had improved her time to adorn herself with all that was most precious to her of array. Her underskirt was gray, with a front of some white tissue, delicate as lace, and over this she had drawn a sarafan of green which turned back at each side so that the embroidered edges looked like bands of silver clear down to her feet.

She had still about her carriage suggestions of offended dignity, and there was tremulous mobility in her face and a misty softness in her eyes which told that peace had come to her only at the price of tears.

“It is for the betrothal,” she announced with unsteady condescension. “They are both dear to me, and, after all, Thoma is my own son.” The commandant’s heart warmed to her with a sudden rush of feeling, and as he took in the full detail of her costume his face began to beam.

“Dear me!” he said. “Dear me! To-day will be a festival indeed!” He bent ceremoniously before his wife, and with a fine and

tender deference lifted her hand and carried it to his lips. —

“There is a miracle here,” he said softly. “It is not you I see, but a girl I knew a long, long time ago.” Akoulina Fedosyevna’s eyes went shyly up to his in acknowledgment of the compliment, and she gave a little flutter of assent.

“I have not forgotten,” she said almost under her breath.

“And there was a betrothal then,” he continued.

“Yes,” she assented expectantly.

“And the girl wore a sarafan with a silver lining.”

“Yes, and it was green like this,” she broke in eagerly. “And do you remember, Pavel, how, when I was afraid it would be crumpled, you laughed and slipped your arms under it so that it would not be mussed?”

“Like this,” he said absently, and drew her close against his breast. They remained thus for some moments, held by the dear remembrance, and laughing self-consciously as they looked into each other’s eyes. Then there was the sound of a door closed in the hall below and

the old lady slipped agilely away from him as if their intimacy was still something to be hidden from the world.

“Are we not foolish, Pavel!” she said softly. “Come. It is time that we went down.”

“No!” he protested stoutly. “Surely it needs no apology that you are still young to me after thirty years.” But he acquiesced in her decision, and giving her his hand with a courtesy which brought a russet rush of color to her cheeks, he led her ceremoniously downstairs.

It was Thoma Kolomin who had come in and they found him clearing himself of his outdoor wraps. He came to them with a smile, and, taking his mother’s hands, he stooped and kissed her affectionately on the cheek.

“You are like a breath of spring,” he said gallantly. “But is it a feast day or a wedding that has beguiled you into bloom?” The old lady flashed a look of guilty intelligence at her husband and gravely shook her head.

“When you are older, Thoma, you will know,” she said with an air that was a dismissal of his demand. “Your father understands it, but it is not yet proper that you should be told.”

But when Sara Lukievna spied her foster mother she understood without a question or a word. As the three came into the great room she saw them and stood, like a wild thing that is startled, for the time necessary to dart at Pavel Kolomin a swift inquiring look. There was reassurance for her, however, in the cheerful complaisance of his grin, and with an inarticulate cry she ran to Akoulina Fedosyevna, and seized her convulsively in her arms.

“O mamatchka!” she whispered almost in the other’s ear. “I am not half good enough. I do not deserve that you should do so much.”

“Hush!” breathed the older woman softly. “It is not good at any time that a man should hear a heresy like that.” She kept her arm around the girl even after she had grown calm, and drew her with her to the sideboard where the preliminary lunch was spread.

“Wait,” said the commandant, as Thoma Kolomin prepared to pour out wine. “We should have something better on a day like this.” He disappeared from the room for a moment and came back bearing in his hands a small, squat, dirty jug.

“It is plum brandy which has been twelve

years in the stone," he announced solemnly, and poured the liquor out in little glasses which he set before each one along the board. "Drink it," he said with a wink at Sara Lukievna which Thoma Pavelovitch did not see. "It is a 'twenty drops' which would not dishonor either a king's health or a betrothal pledge." The girl flushed furiously and left her glass untasted where it stood. The commandant looked at her with assumed surprise.

"Take it!" he roared. "I will not have the memory of my betrothal flouted by a girl." Sara Lukievna laughed, but she made no motion to take up the glass.

"I will not," she declared positively. "It is bad luck, little father, for a girl to drink, even to the ghost of a betrothal, before she has had a chance to pledge her own."

"Very well!" said the commandant impressively. "I shall drink the toast by myself then; and to show that I hold no malice, I pledge it formally to 'Sara's chance.'"

"I will join you in that," said Thoma Pavelovitch with sudden interest. The two men clicked their glasses gravely and, before drinking, bowed to each other with ceremonious

form. But when they turned again Sara Lukievna had fled and taken Akoulina Fedosyevna with her into the dining-room beyond.

The two men followed and all four took their places at the formal board. There had been no special preparation, and the dinner moved in the plain routine of the ordinary meal. But the atmosphere of the place was somehow charged with something different from that of the ordinary day. There was an intangible stimulus about it which held the air like a fragrance and kept the senses alert with the continual suggestion of something unexpected that was to come.

The three who were conspirators were frankly conscious of it, and knew instinctively whence the inspiration came. But Thoma Kolomin, ignorant of the plot, saw only that there was some mysterious understanding, among the others at the board, which moved them strangely and keyed them to an unusual note of judgment as to what was humorous in ordinary speech.

His father watched him closely, canvassing for symptoms that Sara's diagnosis of him had not been wrong. He verified them one by one,

even to the leisureliness of which she had complained. No one could watch the young man's manner toward the girl, the way his eyes followed her, and the grave attention with which he hung upon her lightest words, without experiencing the conviction that she was to him an object of most intimate desire.

But his was not a passion which dared to raise its eyes. She had become so wonderful to him, a thing of such perfected daintiness and fire, that in his thought he placed her always up above him, like the Virgin on the wall, and never once suspected that she might like better to come down from her pedestal and stand frankly at his side.

But there was no doubt but his attitude constituted a justification of Sara Lukievna's faith, and in deference to the prospect the commandant sent for the squat jug. Before the meal was over the "twenty drops" had become forty and the forty a preliminary unit in a steadily increasing scale, the surmounting of which failed not to soften his heart and limber joyously his tongue.

He became mysteriously confidential and elate, told garrulous stories whose meanings

were palpably molded on the sentimental issue which was so strongly in his mind, and propounded toasts so appallingly suggestive of the secret which called them forth that the two women were at much concern lest he should plumply blurt out the truth.

Nor did he show improvement when the sweetmeats had been served and the time arrived for him to fulfill his promise and take away his wife. He did not hesitate to suggest that the hour for action was immediately at hand, but it was equally plain that the conviction had possessed him that the affair could only reach a sane result if he remained and looked after it himself. In accordance with this idea he settled himself in his chair and took out his copper pipe.

“Do not mind me,” he said cheerfully. “I think I shall sit here and smoke until I am ready for my nap.” Sara Lukievna watched him with amusement in her eyes. But as the minutes were consumed and no progress apparent toward the opportunity she craved, she grew uneasy and then grave, and finally in desperation turned to Akoulina Fedosyevna, the tears starting in her eyes. The older woman

responded instinctively to the girl's silent call and without a moment's hesitation went at once to her relief. Going to her husband, she bent above him, as if for a caress, and put her arm around his neck.

"You stupid!" she whispered fiercely, drawing her arm so tight that it almost took away his breath. "Do you want to spoil the whole thing? Come away with me at once!" The little man struggled frantically to an upright position, and pulled at her arm till he could get his breath.

"Let me alone," he gasped. "I am all right here where I am." She paid no attention to his struggles, but with her arm still round him, looked up at the younger pair.

"Pavel is a little tired," she announced apologetically. "He thinks it would be better if he should go up-stairs for a time and have a nap." The commandant gave a subdued growl of protest as she pulled him to his feet. But for thirty years he had been submitting to like discipline, and he lacked the force to make a contest now.

The couple made uninterrupted progress toward the door, though as a measure of precau-

tion Akoulina Fedosyevna kept her hands steadily on her husband, lest in a stubborn moment he should attempt revolt. She held up the curtain and made him pass out first, and, before following him, paused to add a final word to the fiction of their going, and saluted Sara Lukievna and her son with a profound bow.

“Pavel is so bad-tempered when he does not get his sleep,” she said. “Perhaps after a little time we shall come back.” Once outside in the hall, she pounced on her husband and dragged him into the little room across the way.

“There!” she said. “Sit here until it is done. It is not you who are going to be betrothed.” The exhilaration of the stimulant which he had had at dinner was beginning to die away, and for some time the old man was content to sit meekly where she had placed him, without even the proffer of a word. But in the end he forgot his injury in his interest, and, getting to his feet, began to walk restlessly up and down the room.

“How much time ought it to take for a thing of this sort?” he asked fretfully. “It seems to me they have been there long enough.” The

old lady came close to him and vouchsafed him a radiant little smile.

"What is time when one is in love?" she said softly. "I do not think, Pavel, that they will find it long." He leaned forward and kissed her mechanically because she was so near.

"I suppose so, I suppose so," he said with whimsical discontent. "But if you had let me stay in there, I believe that the trick would have been turned in half the time." He wandered over to the door and listened intently for sounds of the distant fray. Then, hearing nothing, he ignored his wife and began to tiptoe out across the hall. Akoulina Fedosyevna was after him in a moment, and seized him convulsively by the arm.

"You shall not! You shall not!" she whispered tragically. "I will not have it spoiled." The commandant shook her off with the first real anger he had shown.

"Let me alone," he said in the same sharp undertone. "I told you that I would not go in." She released her hold as if he had struck her, and dropped meekly back. The commandant proceeded softly until he had crossed the hall and come to the doorway of the other room.

Standing close to the heavy curtain, he moved the edge of it aside until he could look into the space beyond.

What he saw there evidently proved of interest, for he remained for some moments with his face glued to the place. Then as cautiously withdrawing it, he turned with a smile and beckoned to his wife with a silent backward movement of his head. But the old lady shook her own head vigorously, and remained where she stood.

“I would not think of it!” she whispered scornfully. “I would not spy on them for worlds!” Pavel Pavelovitch was less thin-skinned, and with a shrug of deprecation set himself industriously to see. The old lady’s conscience did not forbid her to stand and watch him, and she was nearly dead with curiosity before he remembered her again and brought to her a crumb of news. It had been evident, for some time, that he had been growing impatient; and when at length he suddenly abandoned his position at the curtain and came to her, she was prepared to hear the worst he might announce.

“What is the matter with the man, anyway?”

he burst out crossly. "He does not seem to know what to do."

"Are they there?" breathed the old lady softly.

"There? Of course they are there! But that is about all there is of it, so far as doing things is concerned. Sara is giving him opportunities enough, but Thoma does not seem to see them when they come." He skipped vigorously back to his post of vantage, and took a new survey of what was going on beyond. Suddenly he turned and beckoned, a new excitement shining in his eyes.

"Come quick," he breathed. "I think it is going to be all right." The old lady forgot her scruples and fairly flew across the passage to his side.

The twilight had deepened almost into darkness, and things in the room were indistinct and shadowy, except that a flare of red in the distant sunset sky lay across the square of the western window, like the trail of a smoky torch. Sara Lukievna and Thoma Pavelovitch had found a place in the eastern corner, near the stove.

The girl had chosen a seat under the small

lamp fastened half-way up the wall, and the yellow light from it warmed up the tones of her ruddy hair till it shone like a halo round her face. The illumination, however, made no serious impression on the room, and Thoma Pavelovitch, sitting at a discreet distance, was almost outside of the magic of its rays.

The girl's face was flushed and she was talking animatedly, but in low tones. Thoma Pavelovitch responded for the most part in monosyllables and at all times bent toward her with a deferential reserve which, each time he thought about it, made his father swear softly under his breath. Akoulina Fedosyevna looked in vain for the signs of agreement suggested by her husband as figuring the near resolving of the fray. The delay, however, was not to be for long. Sara Lukievna's patience had worn threadbare in the strenuous game and, without warning, she made up her mind to venture on a heroic measure of new play. A pause had fallen between her and the man beside her, and in the silence of it she leaned suddenly forward and looked straight into Thoma Pavelovitch's eyes.

“Why do you not do it? You never can find

out till you do!" she said softly, and stopped with lips parted like a frightened child's. The young man jumped as if he had been struck, and rose nervously to his feet.

"What?" he said sharply. "What was it that you said?" She rose as he did, almost unconsciously, and the color blazed in her cheeks till she was fain to cover them with her hands. She did not speak, but her eyes held themselves bravely on his and there was a joy of giving in them that even his slowness could not misunderstand.

"Is it true?" he said almost sternly. "Does it mean that you care for me—that I may have you for all time?" He reached for her hands, but she held them tight against her face.

"Perhaps so," she said in a smothered voice. "But if you do not care—"

"Care!" he cried. "I have wanted you above all things, but you were so far away that I never dared to hope!" Sara Lukievna's hands went down and she faced him with a nervous laugh.

"Then why have you never told me so?" she cried tremulously, and threw herself forward against his breast.

The commandant waited until he saw the red head go down in eclipse behind the brown, and then, seizing his wife, he whirled her wildly with him into the little room across the hall.

“He has done it! He has done it!” he cried joyfully, and danced madly around her in the dark. “Was it not fine!” he said breathlessly, stopping in his gyrations to seize her round the waist. “I want to shout. It makes my blood go boiling in my veins.” But Akoulina Fedosyevna took her enjoyment in a different way. Being a woman, she found no wish to dance, but, seizing the first moment when the partner of her joys was still, she clung to him convulsively, and put her head against his breast and cried.

CHAPTER IX

THE MEETING ON THE HILL

Outside, the sunlight was clear and brilliant, though the blue of the sky still had in it a hard tinge of cold. The afternoon lingered perceptibly and Pavel Kolomin, watching it through his window, was conscious of the impression that the days were again beginning to be long.

It was not that there was any startling change. There was the same silentness in the landscape, the same lack of everything that moved. But there was a sense of moisture in the air that was a promise, and the commandant had found himself bearing unwilling witness to its presence, in the twinges of rheumatism it brought him in his knees.

For three days he had defied the onslaughts of the disease, but, on the fourth, the swelling brought him to a truce and he rebelliously resigned himself to confinement in the house. He refused to go to bed, however, and sat all day

by the window where he could look out on the post. It was not so comfortable there as near the stove, but he found a grim sense of still being in the fight, in thus exposing himself to the danger of the draughts.

“The sap starts easier in you young fellows than it does in me,” he said to Thoma Pavelovitch, “but I shall have as much in me as any of you by the time the world gets warm.”

Sara Lukievna and his wife tended him assiduously and stood vicariously between him and an irritating world. The mantle of his authority in the post fell temporarily on the shoulders of Luka Strukof and his son. These two became his eyes and ears, and, though he found it difficult to believe, kept the wheels of government oiled and turning with quite as much smoothness as if the commandant himself had officiated at the machine.

The close companionship thus brought about stirred into life an entirely new bond of sympathy between the two men. There had been no active antipathy on either side, but Luka Strukof's reticence had kept him from direct advance and Thoma Kolomin had come to the acquaintance with an opinion shadowed by the

suspicion born of their first meeting on the boat. But the interest of the younger man in Sara Lukievna made him turn to her father with a more open heart, and when the chance of Pavel Kolomin's illness threw them thus closely together for the time, he gratefully embraced his opportunity and set himself to make the man his friend. The commandant recognized the new intimacy almost before it was assured, and was at no pains to keep his satisfaction hid.

"I knew that you would like him," he declared confidentially to his son. "He does not crack so easily at first, but he is all solid meat inside."

If Pavel Kolomin could have had four windows to look out of facing the four ways, his world might still have seemed reasonably within his grasp. Having but one, he gave close heed to all that came in the range bounded by its four casements and missed few details of what happened in his view.

The outlook embraced but a small portion of the post, but he found in it the level square, the house at the gate, the entrance to the stockade, and beyond it the landing, the broad bend of

the frozen river and, in the ultimate distance, Konovalof's squat watch-tower, which looked back at him with malevolent challenge from the other side. In the three days of his imprisonment he had formed many judgments from the happenings which thus passed before his eyes, and it was impatience over one of them which made him finally reach out and ring sharply the little bell which stood beside him on a bench. Luka Strukof answered the summons almost at once, but the commandant began to speak before he was fairly in the room.

"Where is Thoma Pavelovitch?" he demanded. "Why does he not report when he comes in?"

"I do not know, your Wellborn," answered the man respectfully. "I have not seen him since you sent him out."

"But he is returned," cried the sick man testily. "I saw him when he came in through the gate."

"That may be," replied the other soothingly, "but he has not yet come into the house." The commandant shrugged his shoulders with so vehement an irritation that unconsciously he stirred his disabled leg. The twinge that came

in it sent one hand to it involuntarily and with the other he waved Luka Strukof furiously toward the door.

“What are you standing there and talking for?” he shouted indignantly. “Get out and find him and bring him to me at once!” Luka Strukof’s eyes twinkled at the querulous show of temper and he saluted with a prompt gesture of assent.

“You shall have him as soon as I can find him,” he said hastily, and left the commandant to the reduction of his unwelcome pain. He met the man he sought at the bottom of the stairs.

“Come to your father,” he said, seizing him by the arm with a pretense of urgent haste. “He saw you through the window and is growling like a bear that you have not come in yet to report.” Thoma Pavelovitch threw off the persuading hand and stood blinking, while the sense of the information arranged itself in his mind.

“But there was nothing to tell him,” he said with slow surprise. “He sent me to the river on a wild-goose chase.”

“Well, for the peace of the saints, go up

and tell him that. If you do not, he will have the roof down on our heads." Thoma Pavelovitch's face relaxed into a smile.

"I suppose I might do that," he said. "It never occurred to me that it would ease his mind." Of his own impulse he started up the stairs and, Luka Antonovitch preceding him, flung open the door as if he were ushering in a king.

"Here he is, your Wellborn," he announced triumphantly. "I met him in the hall as he came in!" Pavel Kolomin's irritation had expended itself in its first outburst and beyond a searching glance at his son he received the statement with an unmoved face.

"Well," he said briskly, "what sort of fish did you find out there, and how many were there in the trap?" Thoma Pavelovitch shrugged his shoulders, and, as he answered, there was a shade of annoyance in his voice.

"You might as well have waited for the evening inspection," he said complainingly. "It was a useless journey. There was nothing whatever in the trap." Luka Antonovitch looked for an outburst of temper from the commandant, but Pavel Pavelovitch's face

remained a mask and he kept his eyes fixed steadily on his son.

“There was a fish in it, and a large one,” he said quietly. “I saw the telltale bending till it nearly touched the ice.”

“Well, there was none in it when I got there,” persisted Thoma Pavelovitch stubbornly. “The telltale was as straight as if it had been driven down.”

“That is just what I wanted to know,” returned the commandant gravely. His face set in harder lines and he fixed his eyes on those of his son with a sternness that was almost rebuke.

“You are young, I know,” he said coldly, “but for all that you might have understood that it was more than a sick man’s whim about a fish which made me send you out there upon the ice. That there was a fish in the trap there is no doubt. But it is not that which counts, but the fact that, having been there, it was not there when you reached the place. I suspected that it would be so, but I could not be sure till I had sent you out.” Thoma Kolomin’s face flushed at the rebuke, but he kept his eyes fixed sternly on his father’s face.

“You mean,” he said at last, “that before I got there some one had taken the fish out of the trap?”

“Yes,” said the commandant, “I saw the man from the window, but could not be sure what he was about.” Thoma Kolomin considered this attentively, as he had done the information that had gone before.

“Who was he? Could you tell?” he said at last. The commandant’s shoulders went up deprecatingly.

“It was too far,” he said. “But I have a feeling it was one of those young fellows from the other side who used to come over to see Sara before you came back to the post.” For once Thoma Kolomin found his answer quickly.

“Why should he be coming now!” he burst out hotly and stopped as suddenly, as he saw the twinkle in Luka Strukof’s eyes. But the commandant did not smile.

“I do not know,” he said quietly. “Perhaps Luka here can tell you. The man went also to his house.” Luka Strukof, too, was slow in showing what he felt, but he had been so lately under suspicion that the commandant touched him on a tender spot.

"What is that?" he cried sharply. "You say you saw the man go into my house?"

"I do not know that he went in," said the commandant in the same steady tone, "but he entered by the gate, passed in behind your house, and after a few moments slipped out to the gate and went away again, as if he had finished whatever he came to do. The robbery of the trap was but an incident. He saw the telltale moving and appropriated the fish as he went along."

The two men stood looking first at him and then at each other in confused bewilderment. In Thoma Pavelovitch's eyes there stirred a resentful note of challenge. But Luka Strukof's face grew white and he moistened his lips incessantly as he turned to the commandant to speak.

"I know nothing of it whatever," he said huskily. "The man may have brought some word to Sara Lukievna, but he did not come to see my wife."

"There was no word for Sara Lukievna," broke in Thoma Pavelovitch promptly. Then as the needlessness of his defense came over him he stopped. "Do not worry," he said

apologetically to his companion. "My father is not sure that the man saw either one." Luka Strukof's eyes went to his mechanically and he automatically nodded an assent; but his mind remained busy with the unwelcome news, and after a moment he turned to Pavel Pavelovitch with distinct reproach.

"Why did you not tell us sooner?" he said. "If we could have taken the man, there could have been no doubt about the truth—all would have been clear."

"Because I was not sure," returned the commandant. "And besides, I am not certain that it is yet too late." Both men straightened instantly to alertness, but Luka Strukof being quicker was the one who spoke.

"Not too late?" he said. "He is still then on this side?"

"Yes," said the commandant. "He crossed below the bend and came down from the north, and he has not gone back that way. I think you will find him in the shelter on the shore just opposite the trap. My idea is that he found the fish heavy when he got it and decided to wait there till it was darker and he could make a safe cut of it straight across." Luka

Strukof's eyes met those of his companion with a quick look of understanding.

"We will report as soon as we come in," he said gravely; and, without further word, turned with Thoma Kolomin and went out hurriedly through the door. The commandant sat, listening wistfully to the sounds of their preparation as they came to him from below. The tingle of adventure stirred impatiently in his blood, and he grinned to himself as the unwelcome fact came home to him that his was the waiting part.

"What a nice quiet life I am going to have with this leg of mine," he said ruefully. "God, what a crime it is for a man to let himself grow old!"

Luka Strukof and Thoma Kolomin did not talk much as they set out on their way. They understood each other without recourse to words, and whatever desire of speech remained to them outside of the mental absorption demanded by their hasty preparation, was swallowed in preoccupation concerning the affair in hand. It rankled with each one that the commandant had cast the slur of treachery on the woman that he loved, and they found no desire

in them except to get quickly to the man they sought and so find out the truth.

They went silently, side by side, till the gate was passed and the trap and the shelter were in sight. Then they paused and stood looking from the shore to the river and back again to the white desolation of the snow-covered banks at their feet. No sign of life was visible anywhere in the landscape, and the shelter, lightly thatched and open toward the trap, seemed too slender a dependence to be chosen by a fugitive as a refuge for his life. The idea came to each man simultaneously, and Thoma Kolomin's jaw set with grim disappointment as he looked.

"Damn the man!" he said under his breath, and the gleam of savage sympathy which came to him from Luka Strukof's eyes told him without words that his companion had a similar regret. But neither had thought to abandon the adventure because of its waning promise of success; and after a moment Thoma Kolomin said:

"Work up behind there on the higher ground; I will go down and come back from the trap."

Luka Strukof nodded and remained where he was, as his companion got into motion and

began on the little descent which led to the level of the ice. Then looking to the priming of his gun, he turned back on his track, and, skirting along the south wall of the stockade, came to a point where he could look down on the shelter from the rear. There was an abandoned building which lay between him and it and at the angle of this he came within thirty feet of the shelter itself, and looked with unobstructed view on his companion as he manœuvred on the lower ground.

Thoma Kolomin had gone out directly to the trap and paused there long enough to pull it up by the cords and look into it, as if his sole object was to see if there was anything inside. Then, as if satisfied on this point, he straightened himself and turned back toward the shore, taking the little path which led to the shelter's open front. He walked leisurely and with no air of having special quest, but Luka Strukof could see how alertly he held his gun and how carefully he challenged every point of tree or rock where possible concealment might be had.

He reached the shelter and passed in, and Luka Strukof stepped boldly out into the open, ready to move forward promptly should the

event show a need. But in a moment Thoma Kolomin came out again alone and, seeing Luka Antonovitch, beckoned to him to come.

"The fish is there," he said moodily, "but the man is gone." Luka Strukof gave an exclamation of regret.

"That is bad luck," he said gravely. "But it does not seem possible that he can be far away." Thoma Kolomin's eyes had been wandering questioningly from one point to another, but now they came suddenly back to Luka Strukof's face.

"You have been through the building yonder?" he asked with a slight nod of his head.

"No, I had just reached it when you came."

"Let us have a look at it, then. It is a much more likely place than this." The house was a low one-story structure made of split logs, with no windows and only one door, and had formerly been used for storing boats. Thoma Kolomin moved away toward it and his companion followed with the evident intention of accompanying him inside. But when they came to it, Thoma Kolomin stopped him with a touch upon his arm.

"Wait here," he whispered. "It is dark in

there, and he might slip by me before I came to see." Luka Strukof nodded and stood still, and as Thoma Kolomin passed stealthily into the house through the half-open door, he loosened his pistol in its sheath and stepped forward so as to cover the unguarded opening, his hand still held on the butt of the weapon at his side.

For a full moment there was no sound whatever from within. Then there was a cry, a sudden shot, a confused scramble of hurrying feet, and a man burst out through the doorway and plunged wildly into his arms. So sudden was the coming of the fugitive that, in spite of his preparation, the encounter took Luka Strukof unawares.

His grip on the pistol tightened and he pulled it mechanically from its sheath. But before he could make use of it, his assailant's arms were round him and he was swept from his feet by the man's mad effort to throw him to one side. He closed with his adversary as by instinct, clinging to him like a leech, and, after an instant's plunging and straining, the two men went heavily down together on the snow.

The pistol was discharged in the mêlée, and

the fugitive, fearing it no longer, let go the arm which held it and struck wildly at Luka Strukof's face. The blow blinded him, and, feeling the other's hand settle grimly on his throat, he lifted his own free hand and with the pistol struck his assailant, with all the force that he could muster, on the head.

At the first blow, the man's grip tightened more fiercely on his neck, but at the second, his jaws clicked and he went suddenly limp. As the tension of his hold relaxed, Luka Strukof threw him away from him and got dizzily to his feet. It was all done in a moment and he was still breathing heavily when Thoma Kolomin, in turn, burst out through the door and ran to where he stood.

"Good!" he cried, as he saw the body stretched upon the snow. "You got him then. It was dark inside, as I said, and, with the light behind me, he threw me down and was by me before I even saw that he was there." Luka Strukof's breath was still too hurried for connected speech. His companion did not wait for a reply but, dropping on his knees beside the fugitive, he straightened the man's legs and arms and began to look for evidences of life.

"You have a hard hand," he said. "It is a wonder he is still alive. I am glad, though, you have not killed him, for I am curious to know what he was doing at the house there at the gate." Luka Strukof steadied his voice by an effort and added his advice.

"Search him," he gasped. "It may be there will be something that will tell." Thoma Kolomin moved promptly on the suggestion, and began a systematic fumbling among the fugitive's clothes. He turned out the prisoner's pockets as he came to them and collected the contents in a heap.

Those in the man's nether garments yielded nothing but a knife, two battered keys, and some pieces of moosehide thongs. But the great one in his parka yielded a miscellaneous store which brought the pile up to an appreciable size. There was a leathern pouch for tobacco, a stone pipe, an extra muffler almost stiff with dirt, a tinder box and fuse, a small book for accounts, a pencil, a greasy pack of cards, a handful of copper coins, and a small package like an amulet tied with a colored thread.

There was no letter or other incriminating

word and Luka Strukof reached for the book, and began to run it through. It had penciled memoranda on almost every page, but they were mostly figures or the lines of marks which stand for scores at cards. Occasionally a day or date was written out, but there was no designation of persons except by initials and absolutely no suggestion by which the man might be connected with the house at the gate or any person of the Kussilof post.

When the last page was reached, Luka Strukof closed the book disappointedly and threw it back into the heap. Then, raking the things over for further clues, he took up the cloth-bound package and slipped off the colored thread. Thoma Kolomin took no direct part in the examination, but stood watching curiously as the package was unrolled.

It had been carefully bound and under the first wrap was tied with a second string. Luka Strukof undid this patiently and continued stolidly till he came to the last fold. But as he drew this back and saw what the object was which lay within, his hand closed over it with a startled cry, and hiding it behind him he turned on his companion with something that

was almost challenge in his eyes. Thoma Kolomin watched him with a slow astonishment.

“What is it?” he said, and reaching out took hold of the other’s hand. Luka Strukof made no strong resistance to the action, but stood as if dazed, so that though he spoke, the words had no connection with the question he was asked.

“What a fool I have been!” he said bitterly. “It has been true, then, all the time.” Thoma Kolomin gently forced the hand that he had taken, and took from it the object which Luka Strukof had found.

It was a locket made of gold with a narrow band of turquoise inlaid on the face, and instead of an attaching ring was thickened at one point so that a chain-hole could be drilled out through the rim. Thoma Kolomin looked at the jewel curiously and from it back again to his friend.

“What is it?” he said again. Luka Strukof heard him through his preoccupation, and turned to him with despairing eyes.

“It is Lisa’s,” he said tremulously. “I gave it to her myself. Look, you will find my mother’s name there on the other side.” Thoma Kolomin turned the locket over mechanically,

and his companion, stirred suddenly by the mad impulse of his wrong, went down on his knees beside the unconscious prisoner, and, seizing him by the throat, began shaking him as if he had been a rat.

“You dog!” he cried. “You may have enjoyed the favor, but you will have to pay the price!” Thoma Kolomin caught him by the shoulders and threw him sharply back.

“Softly, man,” he said. “Do not kill him, till you are sure he is the one. Perhaps he came by the locket in a decent way.” As usual with Luka Strukof when heavily distraught, his face had set till it was like a mask, but his eyes glowed with a fire that showed all the passionate madness that was consuming him within. He mastered himself, however, after a moment, and got slowly to his feet.

“You are right,” he said huskily. “The man is entitled to his word.” He turned his back to the prisoner and stood with his hands pressed together in evident struggle toward self-control. Then with a lightning change of impulse, he whirled about and before Thoma Kolomin could come to him, was down again beside the unconscious figure on the snow. The

hands of the commandant's son went out, and he made a quick motion forward with thought to interfere. But before he reached the two men, he saw that this time Luka Strukof meant no harm, but was chafing the prisoner's hands and shaking him with the evident desire to bring him back to life. He brought to his ministrations a pathetic haste and, as Thoma Kolomin bent over him, he looked up with an almost fierce appeal.

"The truth!" he cried thickly. "Help me to get the truth!" Thoma Kolomin went down on the other side and began to render deliberate aid. The rough succor served of its purpose, for after a little the man's color came back, and he began to twitch and stir uneasily his hands and legs.

Then his eyes opened, and as his wits gathered so that he realized where he was, he suddenly surged upward in a mad effort to escape and struck out furiously with his arms. Both his captors were upon him in a moment and, though he thrashed about wildly, like a fish in a boat, they forced him back relentlessly against the snow, and held him helpless in his place. Thoma Kolomin was the first to speak.

"Be quiet," he said breathlessly. "You can not get away." The man's eyes fixed themselves on him with a defiant stare.

"Why do you hold me?" he demanded sullenly. "I have done nothing wrong."

"Perhaps not," returned the commandant's son. "But you will have to give a reason why we find you spying and hiding on this side."

"I was not spying," broke in the man resentfully. "I came to bring a message for a friend." Thoma Kolomin's face darkened and his brows drew down into a frown.

"Then it was still treason for some one," he said coldly. "There is an order out that no person here shall receive a message from your post." The man shrugged his shoulders and his mouth twitched with a grim humor of contempt.

"It is a common treason then," he said coolly. "The message was an entirely private one to a woman of the post." The eyes of his captors met in a significant flash of understanding, and Luka Strukof swore softly to himself.

"Who was the woman?" he demanded with such calmness as he could command, though his

voice trembled so that he could scarcely keep it in control. The fugitive's mouth hardened into a firmer line.

"You have no right to ask," he said sullenly. Then his eyebrows lifted in a sudden comprehension and he let his eyes rest with interest on his questioner's impassioned face.

"So it is your woman, then," he said thoughtfully. "By the Theotokos, you are out of luck!" The man's sympathy was harder to bear even than his silence, and before he had finished speaking, Luka Strukof had him by the throat.

"When was it?" he cried with a snarl like an angry dog. The prisoner took the attack philosophically, making no resistance except to fight away the other's hands.

"Hold on," he said coolly, "there are better ways of getting information from a man than by shutting off his voice. What is it worth to you to know? If I tell you, will you let me go?" Luka Strukof began on a ready acquiescence, but Thoma Kolomin intervened.

"We can make no promises," he said warningly. "Tell what you know and if there is no treason in it you need not be afraid." The man

lifted his hands palms upward, with an acquiescent shrug.

“Oh, well!” he said. “Let us talk then of something else. I am well satisfied to have no hand in coming between a woman and her man.” Luka Strukof listened with an apparently impassive face, but at the end he turned to Thoma Kolomin with an agony of entreaty in his eyes.

“Why not give the promise?” he said brokenly. “It is plain the matter belongs to us rather than to the post.” Thoma Kolomin’s face lit sympathetically and he lifted his shoulders as he spoke.

“Will you answer for it to my father, if there turns out there was need he should be held?” Luka Strukof’s answer fairly leaped from his tongue.

“To the last reproach!” he cried and whirling round upon the prisoner, he thrust out his hand.

“Go on!” he commanded. “You have my solemn word.” The man’s eyes lit with a gleam of triumph, but he gave no further sign of satisfaction beyond a phlegmatic nod.

“My hand on it,” he said. “What is it you

want to know?" Luka Strukof drew out the locket and held it before him on extended palm.

"How did she come to give you this?" he said harshly. The man hesitated for a moment, looking from the locket to Luka Strukof in crafty speculation. Then he laughed.

"Nu," he said, "I will deal fairly with you. I had it from no woman. It came to me as a stake at cards." Luka Strukof received the statement in a confused silence and did not speak again till he had rearranged his conviction to fit the facts.

"The man from whom you had it," he said finally; "was he the one who sent you here to-day?" The fugitive seemed to find the question to his liking, for he threw back his head and laughed again.

"Nu, but you are a shrewd guesser!" he cried quizzically. "It was the very same."

"And you came to tell her to meet with him to-day?"

"I did not say so before, but it is true." For a long moment Luka Strukof waited dizzily with closed eyes. Then without looking at the man at his feet he spoke again.

"Is it too late?" he breathed. "Have they

already met?" Again the man's eyes sought his face in stealthy calculation, and it was plain that his candor was struggling with his desire to shield his friend. Thoma Kolomin saw it, and put his hand down on his arm.

"Tell us the truth, man," he said sternly. "We are dealing honestly with you." The man nodded and looked up at him with a propitiatory twinkle in his eye.

"That is right," he admitted promptly. "Though I am not sure the truth will be the best." Then turning to Luka Strukof he went on, as frankly as if there had been no hesitation in his mind.

"I do not know about the hour," he said. "It would be somewhere between the time I left the word and dusk." Luka Strukof's glance went hastily upward toward the sun.

"There may be time," he said huskily. "Where was it they were to meet?" The prisoner's face was again a mirror of his concern, and he scrambled slowly to his feet.

"Do not ask me that," he urged pleadingly. "What would you gain by seeing it with your eyes?" In answer, Luka Strukof turned on him with so fierce a gesture that involuntarily

he gave back. Thoma Kolomin stepped promptly in between.

"Speak if you know," he said. "It was so promised in the bond." The man yielded to the double coercion and set aside his scruples with a shrug.

"Let us get through with it then," he said impatiently. "If you are not too late, you will find them beyond the storehouse at the lower beach." It was the last question that was asked.

Luka Strukof, the bitter information gained, made no further claim upon his speech. He stood looking fiercely down the river, his lips moving inarticulately, and then, yielding to the mad purpose growing in his mind, began almost stealthily to move away from his companions back along the ridge. As he walked he swayed unsteadily like a drunken man, and did not once look back. Thoma Kolomin called to him to wait.

"Come back," he cried. "We are not finished here!" But Luka Strukof paid no heed, and the commandant's son turned to the prisoner with a significant lifting of his gun.

"Do you know how to run?" he inquired

abruptly. The man bowed with mock seriousness as he understood.

“If there is a need,” he said sarcastically.

“The need is here,” replied the other grimly, “and I will not promise you how long I shall wait.” He turned toward the river and motioned peremptorily with his hand. “There is clear ice between here and the other shore,” he added. “Keep your eyes ahead of you and I will give you five minutes to get out of range.”

“God! you are generous!” cried the other jeeringly. “You forget that I am guaranteed free passage under our bond!” He did not wait to argue the matter, however, but bending, gathered up the small pile of his possessions and stowed them hurriedly in his blouse. Then with a smile and a defiant wave of his hand he ran lightly down the slope and out on the ice beyond.

His caution kept his glance to the front till he was well out toward the middle of the stream. Then he stopped suddenly and whirling, sent back toward his late captor, a long derisive shout. He might as well have saved himself the trouble which he took, for the place he had left was empty of all figures, and following

along the line of the bank he saw Thoma Kolomin moving swiftly down the river, intent on nothing except to overtake his comrade who had gone before. The two came together at the open gate of the stockade. Thoma Kolomin's own glance went through it to the house at the gate, but Luka Strukof moved on by it without a motion to go in. He spoke no word as Thoma Kolomin joined him, but did not dispute his right to come, and the two men went on together side by side.

The late afternoon breeze had begun to blow up from the sea, and there rode in with it a thin vapory mist, which blotted the sunshine from the landscape, and restored to the vacillating season its accustomed chill. The sting of it against his face so matched the wintry desolation at his heart, that Luka Strukof shivered under it, as if his grief had physically set upon him in the life.

But his passion only rose up in him in fiercer protest against fate, and he quickened his pace until it became almost a run. There was nothing for him in the world just then but the making sure concerning his betrayal by his wife, and the mad tumult of his doubts so rang in his

ears that the sounds around him, the snapping of trodden twigs, the hard breathing of his comrade, the crunch of the snow beneath their feet, passed him by unnoticed except in so far as they fitted in and became a natural part of the wild whirl in which he moved.

It was not long before the trees came closer, the snow firmer under their feet and the path began to climb up the steeper face of the ridge which lay between the two men and their unpleasant goal. The increased effort forced a slower pace, and as they came near the top they found themselves bending uncertainly before the rush of the wind which at the higher elevation had grown into a keen, penetrating blast.

They reached the summit and stood looking down. But Luka Strukof, after a swift glance at the line of empty shore and the storehouse at their feet, pressed forward again impatiently, and began on the precipitous descent. They were scarcely under way, however, when Thoma Kolomin, with an exclamation, reached forward and caught his companion by the arm.

"Look," he cried, and pointed with his hand. It was almost dusk, and the tremulous mist

rendered uncertain the detail of everything except the narrow circle immediately at their feet. But at the lowest dip of the hollow, where the shore-line of the river began to swing in shallow curve out toward the next long finger of the coast, there had detached itself from the land a small black spot which showed sharply as it began to move out on the white surface of the ice. It was the figure of a man running, and they watched it in silence till there was no longer room for doubt. Then Thoma Kolomin turned with a shrug and let the butt of his gun down beside him on the snow.

"We are too late," he said. "He is already half-way out there on the ice." Luka Strukof did not answer, but stood stiffly in his place, and as the failure of his plan came clearly home to him he caught in his breath in a convulsive sob.

Thoma Kolomin watched him with a great pity in his heart. The confession of the prisoner, which shifted the burden of suspicion from the shoulders of Sara Lukievna to those of Luka Strukof's wife, had dismissed him definitely from the rank of actor in the tragedy, and left him simply a spectator in the unrolling

of the plot. He turned impulsively and threw his arm around the other's shoulders.

"What is the use?" he said. "Let us go back and finish our report." Luka Strukof threw off the arm almost fiercely, and stayed stubbornly in his place.

"No!" he said huskily. "Not till she comes back." Thoma Kolomin knew as well as he did that they stood in the only road by which the guilty woman could regain the post, and realized that it was his companion's thought to wait and intercept her as she came. His first thought was that the meeting must be prevented at any cost. But a glance at the determination in Luka Strukof's face and the mad intensity of passion which looked out from his eyes took hold of him so that he wisely changed his mind, and determined to drift passively with the other's mood.

"Very well," he said weakly, "though I believe it would be better if we should go." Luka Strukof did not answer, and they stood in silence, looking down the narrow way. The sun was already set, and the cold, reflected twilight afforded them no clear vision farther than the bottom of the slope. Even there, the crows

feeding belatedly on the refuse of the beach seemed more like bats than birds as they flew to and fro.

There was a restless stir of wind in the trees and a whispering of leaves which made listening a mockery, and set their hearts jumping with a hundred false alarms. Both knew the waiting could not be for long, but it was Luka Strukof's keener watchfulness that announced the signal which brought it to a close.

He made a sudden step forward and gave an involuntary cry. Thoma Kolomin, following the direction of his glance, saw that the crows had risen from the beach, and were noisily circling backward and forward above it in the air. Instinctively he reached out and set on Luka Strukof a detaining hand. The latter was shaking like a leaf, and so intent on the vision which was about to disclose itself below, that he had forgotten his companion and was wholly unconscious of the restraint.

For a breathless moment both men stood thus, straining their eyes and ears to catch the first sign of the coming of the recreant wife. Then, like a darker shadow, first between the trees and a little later as a distinct figure, as

she flitted across the wider open spaces, they saw that it was indeed a woman, as they had thought, and that she was coming swiftly up the hill.

Luka Strukof's face had become livid, and he whispered softly to himself. Thoma Kolomin forced him back behind a low-growing fir, so that the new-comer should not see them till she was immediately upon them in the way. Luka Strukof made no sign of opposition or even of understanding, but kept his eyes focused steadily on the rising path, except that for an instant, when he was in the new place, he bent them long enough to make sure of the priming in his gun.

Presently they could hear the rustle of the woman's skirts and the swish of the returning branches which she pushed aside. Then with a suddenness which startled them even in their expectation, she was upon them, and stood before them in the way.

Her hood had slipped back from her head, and she was panting with the exertion of the unaccustomed climb. It was not Lisa Fedorovna, but Sara Lukievna, and coming on them unexpectedly she stopped abruptly with a sharp

note of fear. She recognized them almost at once, and made an impulsive motion toward them with her hands. But both men stood as if frozen in their tracks, and it took but one glimpse of the agonized confusion of her father's face and the shameful accusation that looked out of Thoma Kolomin's eyes, to give her an understanding of what their thought in spying on her had been and why they were there thus strangely in the way.

For a tense moment, she stood and looked at them, her lips parted and a wild flood of color surging upward in her face. Then, lifting her head to its full height, she swept by them proudly, without another look, and disappeared across the crest of the ridge above them, along the path that led back to the town.

CHAPTER X

THE QUESTIONING OF LISA

The climax was so different from the one which they had nerved themselves to meet, that both men stood stupidly following the departing woman with their eyes till she was fully out of sight. Then they turned to each other with an almost equal sickness at the heart. The younger man had convinced himself so thoroughly that it was not Sara Lukievna, but the older woman, who had been at fault, that the truth came to him with an overwhelming sense of shock. Luka Strukof found in the development only a new and further pang. For while the disclosure set his daughter also in the wrong, it afforded no explanation which would lift from Lisa Fedorovna the appalling burden of her guilt.

“You were right,” he said tremulously. “We shall find nothing here. Let us go back now to the post.” But Thoma Kolomin’s eyes

remained fixed on him in mute refusal and he sorrowfully shook his head.

"I can not do it—yet," he said. "You go and put the report in for us both." Luka Strukof stood scraping the snow mechanically with his foot, and looking up shiftily from time to time to his companion's moody face. He appeared to be weighing the whole matter; then he straightened himself with sudden resolution, and put out his hand.

"Take heart," he said. "For you it may not turn out so badly in the end." Thoma Kolomin responded awkwardly to the advance and for a moment the two men stood gazing wistfully into each other's eyes. Then, with a formality which was a measure of their preoccupation, they clasped hands gravely, bowed distantly to each other and parted, the one remaining, the other setting out alone on his journey toward the post.

The end of the report found the commandant with a face that was very grave. Luka Strukof had spared no detail, either of the capture or of the pursuit, and, with the whole pitiful tale before him, Pavel Kolomin found himself not so much convinced of the guilt of the parties

concerned, as stirred by a vague irritation that the thing should have come to him at all.

“When I told you yesterday that the man I saw came from the house at the gate,” he said impatiently, “I did it to stir your interest, and not because I thought the women had been doing something wrong. It looks bad for your wife, I admit, but Sara Lukievna—confound the girl! She ought to be taken out and whipped!” He considered again, frowningly and in silence. Then he said: “Well, I suppose I have got to go into the matter, if only to get that fool boy of mine to come back and go to work. You were wrong in letting the man go, when you had him in your hands. It would have helped to know who sent him from the other side. Do not go home to-night. Stay here to sleep and leave me to talk with Sara before you see your wife.”

Luka Strukof submitted without opposition, though he knew the commandant well enough to be conscious that the suggestion was not so much a request as a command. Pavel Kolo-min’s affection for the man before him made him gentle in the way in which he imposed his will, but he was always the ruler as well as the

man, and it was plain, in whatever guise his demand was made, he expected it unquestioningly to be obeyed.

In this case, he had no mind to risk through inattention a failure for his plans, and he himself hobbled out with his compulsory guest, and saw him established in a proper room. The latter, tired and homesick, hardly felt beneath the kindness shown him the touch of the iron hand, and found in himself scarcely a shock of interest even that, when Pavel Kolomin went out and left him, he closed and locked the door.

As for the commandant, when he had regained his room, he lost no time in sending for Sara Lukievna to the house at the gate. She responded promptly to the summons, and it was evident at the first glance that she had found no surprise in being sent for, and had welcomed the opportunity to come.

Outside, the mist had thickened almost to a rain, and her hair, and the long cloak she had drawn around her for protection, were beaded thickly with drops of moisture, which twinkled in the light as she came in. Her face was flushed and her eyes red with crying and, though the commandant held out his hand to

her, she ignored it, and made no motion to come to him for the usual kiss of greeting. Instead, she stopped just inside the door, and stood looking at him with such a blaze of indignation in her eyes that Pavel Kolomin wisely refrained from questioning her and waited for her to speak.

“Well, I am here!” she said finally. “What is it that you want?” The commandant looked at her with reproachful deprecation, but she remained so plainly unappeased that his glance went down to the floor.

“There is nothing in the matter that should call for anger,” he said mildly. “Your father has come in, and I thought perhaps you might add to his report and tell me certain things I want to know.”

“What has he said?” she burst out fiercely. “What has he dared to say?” Her indignation choked her and she stood rubbing the palms of her hands with her fingers, the tears rising in her eyes. Then with a dry intake of the breath she added: “He ought to be ashamed to think such things of his own flesh and blood!” The commandant did not answer directly, but before she had finished, beckoned

her with an impatient motion of the hand.

"Come here!" he said sharply. "Whatever has happened, there is no reason for your holding it against me." The girl's wrath broke with her tears, and after an instant's hesitation she went to him with a rush, and, pushing herself into her customary place beside him on his chair, threw her arms around him and hid her face against his neck. The old man stiffened and stretched his head up vainly, in the effort to avoid being wet by the rain-drops in her hair.

"Easy, my child, easy!" he cried. "Remember that I am made all in one piece, and though my rheumatism is out there at the other end, it hurts me just the same when I am jolted anywhere along the line." In spite of herself the girl laughed almost hysterically, and lifted her weight so that he could adjust himself to the embrace.

"What did they say?" she demanded without lifting up her head. "What did they tell you I had done?"

"Your father made no accusation against you at all," he answered. "He simply said that you met and passed him out there in the way."

"But Thoma did," she insisted with a returning ring of anger in her voice.

"How could he? He has not yet come in," he replied evasively.

"But he did, before," she repeated, "out there on the hill! O batka," she cried, raising herself until she bent threateningly above him, and her indignant eyes were close to his. "He looked at me! He looked at me as if I had been unclean!" The old man patted her soothingly on the shoulders and sought to draw her back again to her place against his breast. She resisted stiffly, and continued to challenge him with her eyes, as if it were he who had done to her the wrong.

"Where is he keeping himself?" she demanded. "I want to tell him what I think."

"I have told you already," he answered, "that he has not come in."

"When will he come?" The commandant stretched the truth to fit the exigency of his need.

"I do not know," he said gravely, "but I am afraid it will not be soon." The girl, as he had intended, caught at once at the sinister suggestion in his words.

"Is he, then, so ashamed that he will not come back?" she demanded scornfully.

"No, not ashamed. But I suspect that he does not want to see you while he believes about you as he does." In her excitement, Sara Lukievna slipped down from the chair-arm and stood erect upon her feet.

"But he has not the right to believe such things about me!" she cried impatiently. "You know you would not, if you were in his place." He looked at her for a moment in meditative silence, but made no effort to draw her back.

"No," he said judicially, "I do not suppose I would. But it might help even me if you should tell me what you were really doing when they saw you out there on the hill." She studied him threateningly for a moment, undecided how far to take the suggestion in good part. In the end, her better judgment conquered and she held herself in check.

"I did not go out there to meet any man!" she said awkwardly.

"But you did meet one," he answered. "At least, your father says he saw him as he went away."

"Oh, that way! Yes, of course," she said

with sudden illumination. "But he was no one who had an interest in me."

"Whom did he have an interest in, then, that you went out to meet him in that way?"

"It was for Lisa," returned the girl eagerly. "She asked me because it was so she could not go herself."

"And you took the man a message?"

"Yes, a message and a package which I delivered into his hand."

"What was the message?"

"Only that she could not come. She said he was expecting to get the package, and I would have nothing further to explain." The commandant's face hardened, and his lip lifted with an unconcealed contempt.

"Is not your father enough for Lisa Fedorovna," he said dryly, "that she has to go out to meet another man?" The girl gasped at the accusation and made a quick, protesting motion with her hands.

"Oh, there is nothing of that sort in it," she declared eagerly. "Lisa does not go out because she cares. The meetings with the man have been purely a question of affairs." This unmistakable corroboration of his previous

fears came to the commandant with peculiar distaste. Had the event shown that Lisa Fedorovna's lapse had been simply one of love, he could have forgiven her without reservation, and felt only on his mind the problem of effecting a reconciliation between the husband and the wife. But with the motive for the meetings established as something further than a matter of the heart, he feared the worst and found decision as to what course he should pursue as far away as ever.

"That is better for your father, I suppose," he said doubtfully. "But it does not help me so much as the simpler explanation might. Yet if it is not love, what is it that takes her so far afield?" The girl hesitated just a moment while she settled with herself that she would not be disloyal to her stepmother in telling what she knew.

"I have never heard," she said. "The only time we ever spoke of it, she asked me not to ask."

"But your father knew, I suppose," he suggested, "or else she would scarcely have liked to take the risk." Sara Lukievna flushed as if the dereliction had been her own.

"I do not think he knew," she said hesitatingly. "Lisa went only at times when he was away at work." The commandant's thought went back to the talk he had once had with Luka Strukof about his wife.

"He did not know," he said absently. "But he did tell me that there was trouble between him and Lisa Fedorovna, and that they were unhappy about this or something else."

"Yes," returned the girl with distinct reserve. "They have been unhappy, but I have never found out surely why it was." The commandant sat silent for a moment, pondering the matter with half-closed eyes. Then he came back to himself and looked up at Sara Lukievna with a smile.

"What a lot of happiness we lose in this world because we think evil of one another when we might think good," he said suggestively. "Luka and Lisa are at outs because each thinks the other is not giving what he should. I am basely suspicious of the whole lot of you, and unhappy because I can not make certain where you are at fault. In the same way, you are sure that Thoma is scandalously unjust, and he—"

“Yes,” she interrupted promptly, “he has no right to think such things about me! He ought to be ashamed!” The commandant stopped short in his homily and put out his hands to her with the first laugh he had given since the interview began.

“I give it up,” he said with a whimsical shake of the head. “Come and kiss me good night and to-morrow we will see again what we can do toward making this fool boy of ours admit that he is wrong.” She complied at once, but so absently and with such perfunctory stiffness in the embrace that he laughed joyously again.

“You stubborn creature!” he said in mock despair. “Go now to Akoulina Fedosyevna for the night. But do not be as severe with her as you have been with me. She is the one person who never thinks any evil in this world.”

But when she was gone, the twinkle faded from his eyes and, lighting his pipe, he sat long into the night, looking thoughtfully at the stove and trying to piece into a clear pattern the motley bits of information about the matter collected in his mind. It was a sorry task, however, and a baffling one, and in the end he

knocked the ashes from his pipe, and, setting both it and the contention aside, went moodily to bed.

Sleep and the sunlight of the cheerful dawn did much to restore in him the kindly confidence with which he ordinarily looked on life, and it is probable that he would have faced his world again with no mark on him of the trials of the night, if it had not been for two further checks which came to him before he reached his morning meal. The first of these was that when he inquired for Thoma Pavelovitch he was told that he had not yet returned; the second, that a messenger came in to him breathless and in haste, to say that in the night the lower warehouse had been broken into and the store of pelts removed.

He was exasperated rather than disturbed that his son continued to hold his grudge so childishly and remain so long away. The looting of the warehouse, however, was a serious affair, and its consideration moved him profoundly, both to anger and alarm. The loss of the pelts was a small item in the count. The better skins were all in the larger storehouse inside the stockade and only a small proportion

of his hoard had been trusted to remain in the more isolated place. But that his enemies should dare to be so bold, stirred an indignant thrill in every fighting fiber of his bones.

He swore a little, softly to himself, and kept the messenger by him till he could decide upon a plan. Now, in Thoma Pavelovitch's absence, he began to realize how much he had been in the habit of depending on his son. He had consulted him so freely that it was with a peculiar feeling of helplessness that he set out to face the present need alone.

As a first offset, he sent out searchers for the missing man, with orders to bring him in incontinently wherever he was found. But the immediate lack remaining, he turned naturally to the one who, next to his son, had been most closely connected with him in his work. Yet though he was separated from Luka Strukof only by a wall, each time the thought of calling him to counsel rose up in his mind, he found himself hesitating to act upon the prompting and uncertain what to do.

"What has his wife been plotting with those people over there?" he asked himself resentfully and delayed to send till he could think

again. But in the end a plan formed in his mind and he ordered the suspected man brought in.

“Well, I see that your wife’s friends were with us again last night,” he said harshly. Luka Strukof was too accustomed to the variability of Pavel Kolomin’s moods to be disturbed by the address, though in spite of him the color came up and showed consciously in his cheeks.

“What do you mean?” he said slowly. The commandant’s intention to be unpleasant showed more strongly in his voice.

“I mean what I say,” he said coldly. “If you are content to have your wife have lovers, I suppose it is outside my province to dispute your taste. But it is entirely within my right to interfere when the Company is called upon to help pay the price and I want to say to you that somebody has got to answer for what was done last night.” Luka Strukof continued to look at his superior with bewildered inquiry.

“Last night?” he repeated. “What was it that was done last night?”

“Just one thing,” returned the commandant sarcastically. “The people from the other side acted on the information your wife sent them

yesterday and came back." The man before him winced as if he had been struck and in his excitement, forgetting the difference in their stations, came forward and put his hand stealthily on the other's arm.

"You found some one last night at the house at the gate?" he whispered. The commandant swore impatiently and shook off the hand.

"No such luck!" he said tartly. "If there was entertainment for lovers here last night the only part we got in it was to pay the bill." He had been watching Luka Strukof narrowly, with the thought that by a blunt assumption of complicity he might surprise from him admission that he had known beforehand of the plot to take the skins. But the man's ignorance was so obviously unfeigned and he was so palpably in the dark as to what was in Pavel Kolomin's mind, that the commandant recognized the futility of further bullying and set himself to be more kind.

"I should have told you," he said more gently, "that last night the lower warehouse was raided and a clean haul made of everything it held." Luka Strukof received the news in silence. It was plain that the shaft had glanced

from the wall of his preoccupation without piercing through. It registered in his consciousness, however, for, seeing that the commandant was watching him narrowly and seemed waiting for him to speak, he finally brought his mind to bear on the thing he had been told.

“How do you know?” he asked stupidly.

“Know!” roared the commandant, his exasperation lifting his voice to higher tone. “The place is empty and there is a trail as wide as a cart-track running down to where they loaded the bales on to the sledges at the beach.” His vehemence brought his listener more surely to himself and when he spoke again it was directly to the trouble in his mind.

“But Lisa—” he said huskily. “What had she to do with that? I do not understand.” His distress was so apparent that the commandant was touched.

“I am as much at sea as you,” he said earnestly, “and we must stand together to find out the facts. It is a hard thing to say, Luka, but I am afraid that all we feared is true about your wife. I have talked with Sara Lukievna and she did go out yesterday to meet a man

from the other side. But the going was not of her own appointing. It was purely to deliver a message from your wife. What the message was I can not learn, for it was delivered in writing and Sara herself does not know. But there are but two ways of looking at the matter that I can see, and each one is equally unpleasant in the end. Either it is a love affair of your wife—which is treachery to you—or she has joined herself to our enemies to work against the post—which is treachery to us all. There is no escape, it seems to me, from one of these two things.”

The man addressed stood so stolidly that he scarcely seemed to hear. But he both understood and made a judgment, for after a moment his lips began to twitch pathetically and his hand felt unconsciously at the pocket in his blouse.

“If it was against the Company alone,” he said fiercely, “why did she give him gifts?” The commandant took advantage promptly of the opening thus made.

“She is the only one who can tell us that, Luka,” he said gently. “Suppose you let me send for her to talk the matter over here.”

Luka Strukof shivered and mechanically shook his head.

"I do not want to see her," he said bitterly. "You talk with her yourself."

"No," said the commandant, "you would be a coward to throw the whole burden on to me. And, besides, it is always better to face the truth squarely, no matter what it brings." He lost no time, though, in acting on the provisional consent. Sending for a man whom he could trust, he delivered to him instructions which, while on the surface they seemed simply a request, in reality amounted to an order for Lisa Fedorovna's arrest. There was no threat in the portion of the charge which Luka Strukof heard. Before him the commandant had simply said:

"Go to the house at the gate, and say to Lisa Strukova that her husband is here with me, and wishes to see her as soon as she can come." But as if with an afterthought, as the messenger was about to leave the room, he had thrown up a detaining hand.

"Oh, by the way—" he said, and hobbled after him to the door. Outside he had spoken further to the man, holding an impressive hand

upon his arm. "This is a confidential matter," he said, "and one that requires haste. You yourself will remain with Strukof's wife, and see that she talks with no one from the time she gets the message till you deliver her here to me. But take Levko Kuvaldo with you and, as soon as the woman is out of the house, have him thoroughly search the place. And do all as quickly as possible. If he finds there anything bearing on what happened here last night, or which would show communication with the people from the other side, have him lose no time in bringing it to me."

His face, however, showed nothing of his thought as he came back into the room. He shot one questioning glance at Luka Strukof where he sat, but without further display of interest dragged his chair to its usual place by the window, where he could see the house at the gate and keep in touch with the way in which his order was being carried out.

He saw the two men set out upon their road and watched them till they disappeared behind the building to which they had been sent. But after that the landscape remained empty of all promise, and he found nothing without to set

at rest the uneasy stir of anticipation in his blood.

There is nothing harder in the world than this waiting for a crisis which must inevitably come, and both men felt it, though in differing degree. With Pavel Kolomin it was a matter of official interest, heightened by the sympathy which moved him for his friend. But with Luka Strukof it was the resolution of a fear which had its roots so deep down in his heart that they fed disturbingly on every energy of his life.

He did not speak after the commandant's return, but sat rigidly in his place, breathing with deep sighs, and looking out staringly before him into the room. But as the minutes dragged, the silence, the concentration, the agonizing uncertainty, wrought their work in him, until he could no longer remain quiet in his chair.

"God!" he cried, and getting to his feet began to pace restlessly up and down the room. The exclamation broke in sharply on the stillness and the commandant fairly jumped, as his senses responded to the call. He turned his head quickly, so as to bring the speaker in his

gaze, but his startled look changed to one of pity as he saw how genuinely the man was moved. Rising in his turn, he went to the table and poured out some vodka into a glass. This he carried to Luka Strukof and held out to him with honest solicitation in his face.

"You will not last out, man," he said kindly. "Drink this. It will help you to keep your grip. Whatever it costs, it is better to have the truth, and in a very little while now you will know." Luka Strukof took the glass mechanically, and without a change of face drank off the fiery liquor it contained. Then he began his restless pacing up and down, and the commandant returned to his lookout from his chair.

He did not speak again till he saw Lisa Fedorovna and the messenger leave the house at the gate, and begin their progress across the open square. When they were well advanced, he turned to the man beside him with a note of warning in his voice.

"Your wife has left the house, Luka," he said quietly. "It will be only a few moments now before she will be here." The man stopped in his place and, as was his custom when seeking

for control, stood with the palms of his hands pressed convulsively together, his eyes fixed on the commandant as if struggling to understand. Then he came swiftly across to the window and looked feverishly down into the open square. It was empty of all figures and he turned on Pavel Kolomin with an almost fierce demand.

"Where?" he said brokenly. "How was it that you knew?" The commandant bent forward his head attentively, and put up a warning hand.

"They are too close for you to see," he said, "but if you listen you will hear them coming in." Luka Strukof's attitude stiffened at once to tense attention, and he bent with fearful interest to catch the sounds of the approach. They came to him unmistakably in the muffled opening and shutting of the great front door, and then in the confused sound of footsteps as the prisoner and her guard came up the bare wooden stairs. His composure held till the change in rhythm of the footbeats announced that the pair had reached the upper hall, and then his hand went out to the commandant with a tragic gesture of appeal.

"You! You!" he cried to him thickly, and

retreating to the window, stubbornly turned his back. The commandant had no time to reason with him, even if he had wished. He made a half-motion to get up, but thought better of it, and was sitting with apparent composure in his place, when the door swung open and the guard held it back to allow Lisa Fedorovna to pass in.

She did not come like one who had been brought. Her tall figure and regal carriage of the head served her in good stead, and as she advanced into the room her presence radiated a quiet dignity of protest which unconsciously compelled respect. The commandant responded to it involuntarily and, coming forward as quickly as his lame knee would permit, he drew out a chair and, placing it gallantly, invited her with a gesture to sit down.

She refused the courtesy with an almost imperceptible movement of her head, though she recognized the service by drawing the chair to her so that for the moment her hand rested lightly on its back. Her attention from the first was given to the figure by the window, and her eyes fixed themselves on it with an intentness which for the time being shut the commandant entirely from her mind. The

guard stood watching them with half-hid curiosity, and Pavel Kolomin dismissed him with a sign.

“You may go,” he said in a low voice. “But remain outside, if I should call. When Levko Kuvaldo comes, send him in instantly to me.” The man saluted and obeyed, and the commandant brought his attention back to the silent woman standing by the chair. Her gaze still rested on the stubborn figure of the man she loved, and it was plain that her confidence was unshaken that at some following moment he would turn and speak. But as the intervals came and passed relentlessly without a sign, the color of her shame and disappointment began to show through the clear olive of her cheeks, and she turned to the commandant with misty eyes.

“It was you alone then who sent for me,” she said with a pathetic touch of pride. “What was it that you wished?” The commandant accepted the responsibility frankly, and began at once on what he had in mind.

“It was I who sent for you,” he said with gentle sympathy. “I was in trouble about certain things which happened here last night,

concerning which, from what your husband tells me, I had hoped that you could throw a further light." At the mention of Luka Strukof's name, Lisa Fedorovna's eyes went swiftly back to him, in the hope that he would this time find an interest and turn. But there was no change in the stubborn pose of the jealous man, and she brought her glance reluctantly to the commandant's expectant face.

"I am not sure that I know what the matter is which is disturbing you," she said unsteadily. "But if you will tell me, I will answer as I can." The commandant was silent for a moment, as if uncertain just where to begin.

"I suppose, in the end, it is a question of personal loyalty," he said thoughtfully. "We are so small a community and so dependent on one another for our very lives that, above all, the thing which counts is that where we put a trust we should find each other true." She followed the words attentively, keeping her eyes fixed searchingly on his face.

"Is there then a question of my loyalty?" she said with some surprise.

"There has, of course, been no accusation of you made, but certain acts of yours have been

reported which, in view of the trouble that has come, require explanation before they can be set aside." She did not try to avoid the issue, but continued to look him squarely in the eyes.

"What are they?" she demanded proudly. "I know of nothing I have done of which I need be ashamed." The commandant's own eyes wavered before the indignant steadiness of hers, and he rubbed his lame knee softly with his hand. Then he looked up quickly with a sudden imperative demand.

"What was the message you sent yesterday by Sara Lukievna to the man from the other side?" he said sharply. In spite of his intention he did not take her unawares. Her eyes widened, but it was with surprise not fear, and when she answered it was with a scornful trembling of her lip.

"So that is the reason that you kept Sara here last night," she said reproachfully. "It was not necessary, your Wellborn, and it was not kind." The commandant made an impatient gesture with his hand.

"It is not a question of kindness," he said dryly. "I have to use the means which seem best suited to the case. The need now is that

I have from you, without evasion, exactly the information you gave to Konovalof's people yesterday in the message which you sent."

"There was none!" she declared eagerly. "There was absolutely nothing said about the post."

"You are sure?" he insisted.

"So sure I will swear it before the Just One, and make it a burden on my soul." The commandant was silent for a moment and his head went down again till she could not see his face. Then he raised it with a wistful look at the forlorn figure of the man across the room.

"I am almost sorry for that word," he said with a sigh, "for it would seem to make you out a worse woman than I have believed."

"What do you mean?" she cried. The commandant's eyes went again furtively to the window, and he lifted his shoulders in an expressive shrug.

"If you did not go to give the man information," he said coldly, "why is it that you have met with him at all?" The implication was so plain that Lisa Fedorovna could not but understand. The color started redly in her cheeks, and, spreading like a flood, swept over

her furiously from neck to hair. As she realized the full significance of the charge and the circumstances which combined to make it serious, her hand went out gropingly to the chair, and, drawing it to her, she suddenly sat down.

“Oh!” she cried. “Oh!” and covered her face with her hands. The commandant watched her with sympathetic eyes. It was a good sign to find her thus strongly overwhelmed and he waited with such patience as he might to see whether the emotion which moved her was distress or shame.

Before he could be sure, there was a knock at the door, and going to it he opened it narrowly, and held a momentary converse with some unseen man outside. Then he closed it, and came back with a folded paper in his hand. His face was less sympathetic and he moved with the air of one who has received an unexpected check. Lisa Fedorovna had in some measure recovered her composure and sat waiting for him with indignant eyes.

“Does he believe this of me?” she demanded with a tragic inclination of her head toward the place where Luka Strukof stood. “Is that the reason he will not speak?” The commandant

was busy with the paper in his hand and scarcely lifted up his eyes.

"Ask him," he said curtly. "He should be able to answer for himself." She started to her feet with the evident impulse of carrying the suggestion promptly into effect, but before she had moved forward from her place her pride checked her and she turned again to the commandant, the light of it shining resentfully in her eyes.

"No," she said with quiet dignity; "if he believes such things about me, it is his place to come to me." The commandant finished his reading, and gave her his attention with a shrug.

"Very well, then," he said curtly. "Let us get through this affair as quickly as may be." He was entirely the inquisitor now and spoke sharply and to the point.

"I understand you then," he said, "to deny that in your meetings and relations with this man you have ever advised him or given him information about the post?"

"Yes," she said.

"And that you have not gone to meet him because you were in love with him or cared?"

"I loathe him," she cried excitedly. "I could not like him if I tried."

"But he cared for you, then," persisted the commandant, "and so you let him come?"

"No. In all our meetings he never spoke a word of love to me at all. He did not dare," she added fiercely. The commandant sighed despairingly and held out the paper in his open hand.

"If that is true," he said, "how does it happen that he addresses you with such lover-like fervor in this letter to you here?" She started forward with a sharp cry of pain, her eyes fixing with fascinated horror on the telltale paper he was holding out.

"The letter!" she whispered. "You have the letter that he sent?"

"Yes. It was just now brought me by the man who found it where you hid it at the house at the gate." For an instant she stood tragically silent, as if the shock of discovery had once and for all time cut her off from speech. Then, as the outrage of it all, the undeserved indignity, and above all the futility of denial in the face of the apparently incriminating evidence he held, swept dizzily through her mind,

a string snapped somewhere in her courage and she burst suddenly into tears.

“I will tell you all!” she said brokenly. “I will explain everything so you can understand!” The fulfilment, however, went no further than the promise, for at that moment, Luka Strukof, stirred suddenly to action by the promptings of his jealous passion, turned from the window and came swiftly to them across the room. His face was livid and his unsteady hands reached out for the letter which the commandant still held.

“Give it to me,” he demanded. “It is my right to see.” He took it without a look at the woman at his side, but before he could set his eyes upon its contents, she had her arms around him and was pleading with him in a wild agony of despair.

“Do not read it, Luka!” she cried frantically. “If you love me, wait till we are alone and I can tell you why it was I allowed it to be sent!” He paid no attention to her entreaties, but holding the letter beyond her reach, read from the open page which faced him till he had its contents indelibly in mind. She struggled helplessly with him while he did it, her incoherent

urgings settling at last to the one pitiful repeated plea, "Wait, Luka! Oh, if you love me, wait!"

The one reading was enough and when he had finished it, his hand opened and the sheet dropped unheeded to the floor. He stood stiffly pressed against her, but after a little the burden of what Lisa Fedorovna was saying bore itself in on his confusion and reaching behind his head he roughly seized her hands.

"Love you!" he cried jeeringly. "Oh, my God! Let me go!" he went on fiercely. "It is not around my neck you should have your arms!" She struggled desperately to maintain her place, but his insane excitement lent him strength and, tearing himself from her clasp, he threw her back so violently that she went reeling half-way across the room.

"I am done!" he announced with fierce intensity. "Go out and meet your lover from the other side!" The action was so rough that Pavel Kolomin started instinctively from his chair.

"Be careful, Luka," he cried warningly. "Remember that, after all, she is your wife." The caution was the last straw laid on the man's

self-restraint. He whirled on Pavel Kolomin like a madman, his arms lifted high above his head.

“Why should I care?” he shouted. “She is not and never has been my wife!”

The denunciation came like a bolt from a clear sky and having delivered it, Luka Strukof himself stopped abruptly, as if disturbed that he had told so much. Lisa Fedorovna cried out sharply and turned to the commandant, her lips parted and her face a mobile mirror of dismay. Pavel Kolomin forgot his pains in his astonishment and leaving his place went briskly across to where Lisa Fedorovna stood.

“There, there!” he said breathlessly. “It is not so bad as that. He will repent it once he is himself.” He put out his hand to her with friendly tenderness, but she shrank from him and stood back.

“Do not touch me!” she said with a proud humility. “It is all true as he has told you. I have never been his wife.” He looked at her dumbly, as if he did not understand, but as the full import of her words grew clear to him, he slowly withdrew his hand till it dropped back to his side. She did not wait for him to speak,

but went on hurriedly, her voice thrilling the more pathetically that she did not weep.

“I never thought, though, to have to answer for the fact,” she said drearily. “It was beyond prevision with me that Luka, of all others, would thus put me on defense. I am not a bad woman, for all that he has said, and there is a reason why, though we are here together, we are still unwed. But it is Luka’s reason and I can not tell it to you without his consent. If he tells you, you will understand. If not, I shall have to remain in your regard as—” she hesitated for the word and then went on with an added quiver in her voice—“as the thing I now appear to you to be.”

She stopped again and the commandant could see that she was struggling wildly with herself to maintain her self-control. He kept his eyes fixed consciously on the ground and presently she spoke to him again.

“Is that all, your Wellborn?” she said in the same full tone. “If so I think that I should like to go.” The commandant looked up to her with quick sympathy in his face.

“Yes, go,” he said. “You have enough to bear without my adding an iota to the load.”

She looked at Luka Antonovitch and made as if she was about to speak. But he would give no sign that he was conscious of her presence and the desire went no further with her than the thought. She straightened herself proudly to her full height and bowed to the commandant with dry eyes. But at the door she stopped and turned to make a last appeal.

“I could explain it, Luka,” she said wistfully, “if you would only let me try. I have never been untrue to you either in word or deed. What I did in this case was done to save you from something worse, and I want to tell you before I go that it was Ivan Ignatich I went out to meet.”

CHAPTER XI

THE RESCUE OF THOMA

Sara Lukievna, going to the commandant, came upon her stepmother as she fled down the stairs.

“Why, Lisa!” she said and paused to let her speak. But the distracted woman put down her head and, without seeming to see her, passed obliviously by. Sara Lukievna stood and watched her till she passed out of the house. It disturbed her that Lisa Fedorovna should even momentarily place herself thus cavalierly outside of her need, but a second thought brought the remembrance that her stepmother was fresh come from the explanation to the commandant of her meetings in the woods, and she surmised shrewdly that the relation had brought to her less of pleasure than of pain.

“I wonder what the truth was,” she said and passed on to the commandant’s door. There

was a confused sound of voices from the room and though she knocked, no answer came to her from within. After a moment's waiting, with the privilege of her position in the house, she opened the door without invitation and went in.

Her father was standing in the center of the room, his hands pressed behind him and his eyes fixed sullenly on the floor. The commandant stood in front of him, his arms outstretched and his palms uplifted in impressive appeal. His absorption in his theme was too great summarily to be checked and, without giving her attention, he went on hurriedly with his speech.

"Go to her, man, and let her tell you," he was saying. "It is the wisest way and, more than that, it is the thing that is most kind." Both men's eyes turned to her sharply as they realized her presence and they came to sudden silence, their eyes fixed on her with an almost guilty look.

"May I come in?" she said. "I knocked, but you did not seem to hear." The commonplace interrogation brought them back wholesomely to the ordinary affairs of life. The commandant's startled pose relaxed and he mechanically nodded his head.

“Yes. Come in,” he said absently. “I was just finishing with your father here.” He turned again to Luka Strukof and put his hand upon his arm. “You are going to take my advice?” he said coaxingly. But Luka Strukof shook his head.

“In the end, perhaps,” he said slowly, “but first I have to settle with the man.” The commandant’s face showed his disappointment and he turned impatiently to the girl.

“Your father is not an easy man to urge,” he said dryly. “When he gets an idea into his head, nothing short of a convulsion will shake it out. Have it your own way, then,” he went on, with a wave of the hand to Luka Strukof which transferred the responsibility to him. “It would be but common justice though to give to Lisa the chance she asks for to make plain her heart.” Luka Strukof acted on the permission without vouchsafing thanks, and went away with no sign given that he was like to change his mind. The commandant turned to Sara Lukievna and, putting his arm around her, drew her with him across the room.

“This is not an easy world, is it?” he said wearily. “And especially for the man who has

it on his shoulders to try to make other people good!"

"It is your own fault for trying," she answered. "Why do you not stop bothering about it and leave Providence to arrange things as it likes?" Pavel Kolomin grunted and blew his breath out through his nose.

"A nice job Providence would make, trying to run this post here by itself," he said scornfully. "Look at your father there, for instance," he added, pointing through the window at the retreating figure of Luka Strukof as he went hurrying away. "Providence, there, appears to be letting him think that it has given him a special commission to go across the river and slaughter the man who has been meeting your stepmother in the woods. Now I could tell him—as I did, though he would not listen to me—that a far better plan would be to make sure first that the man really needs killing by going for the information to your stepmother at the house at the gate."

"To kill the man!" she cried. "What did Lisa tell you she had done?"

"That is the trouble! Providence did not think it worth while to have her tell us that.

Your mother wanted to explain, but your father was so sure he knew already, that he would not listen to the facts." The girl turned on the commandant sharply, her dark eyes full of scorn.

"And you let them go without finding out the truth?" she cried. The commandant faced the protest without a waver to show he was disturbed.

"There was no choice," he said quietly. "I made no bones of question till I was sure they had committed no treason toward the post. But at that point I stopped, for it seemed to me that beyond it no one but God had a right to probe their hearts."

"But there must be some way," cried the girl helplessly. Pavel Kolomin looked at her with sudden speculation.

"I wonder now if you might prove to be the way," he said thoughtfully. "Lisa is fond of you and there is a chance that you might find success with her where the rest of us have failed."

"You mean that I might go to Lisa and ask her for the truth?"

"Yes," said the commandant, "why not? If

you fail, there is no harm done, and if you succeed, it may mean that you will save for your father his reason, if not his life." The girl shrank from the undertaking, but the importance of its doing appealed to her so that her heart pushed her reluctantly forward toward consent.

"I will try it, of course," she said finally, "but before I begin you must tell me exactly everything that has occurred." She drew a chair up close beside the commandant, and waited for him with her hands clasped in her lap. Pavel Kolomin dealt with her frankly, telling her the facts without omission, from the time when he had seen the stranger first tamper with the trap. The only detail which he withheld was the final revelation that Luka Strukof and Lisa Fedorovna were not truly man and wife. The girl listened with close interest, but at the end, her attention showed itself fixed on something other than that which stirred so uneasily in Pavel Kolomin's mind.

"But, *batka*," she said, "are you not afraid that something bad has happened to Thoma? Even if he were really angry with me, there is no place in the settlement where he could hide

himself so long." The commandant's jaw dropped and he looked at her in blank surprise.

"I had not thought of it," he said with hasty introspection. "It never occurred to me that they would dare." His faith in his son was too great to be so easily shaken, and almost as he spoke, his face cleared and he threw up his chin with a scornful assumption of disbelief.

"They could not take him!" he said contemptuously. "If they have got him it is because he went with them of himself!" The girl's optimism, however, was less sure. Her face clouded and in her eyes there showed the promise of immediate tears.

"But, little father," she said tremulously, "suppose he should not come back!"

"I will marry you myself," declared the commandant stoutly. "I am not afraid." The matter was too near to Sara Lukievna's heart to be thus passed off with a jest.

"Be serious," she pleaded. "You surely will send some one over there to ask about him, will you not?" The old man leaned forward and patted the girl's hands affectionately as they lay in her lap.

"There, there! Do not cry!" he said to her

soothingly. "I would do it for your sake, even though I thought there was no need."

"But when?" she persisted.

"By noon, at the latest. Some one will have to go over, anyway, to see what happens to your father and it will be no trouble to make inquiry for two." The girl's face cleared and starting to her feet she bent impulsively above the commandant and put both her arms about his neck.

"You are good to me," she cried. "If Thoma does not come back I am not sure but I would just as lief have you. I shall do what you wish. I will see Lisa between now and noon and, if she will talk with me, you shall have a report about it when I come to hear what you have learned." As an earnest of intention she gave him a final squeeze and, disengaging herself without further word, ran swiftly from the room.

Outside, she paused and considered what to do. Her promise to the commandant prompted immediate visit to Lisa Fedorovna and the house at the gate. But the day was young and the hazard sure that, late as well as soon, she would find her stepmother in her usual place,

and she found herself drawn alluringly by the temptation to defer the interview, till she had gone over the ground of yesterday's adventures and seen for herself exactly where everything occurred.

Lest Pavel Kolomin should be again at his window, she shaped her course ostentatiously across the open toward the point where her duty called. When the house at the gate was reached, she passed around the corner as if going to the door. But once hidden by the walls, she stopped and looked guiltily around her to see if any one was near. Finding herself unobserved, she set out again, and keeping the house as a shelter between her and the commandant's prying eyes, passed quickly away from it to the blank wall of the stockade.

From this point to the coveted exit by the gate there was nothing to shelter her if any one should spy and again she stood breathless for a moment, studying the chances and steadying herself with one hand against the wooden wall. Then with a deep breath, she darted forward and keeping close to the great fence, skimmed like a frightened bird along its confines and out through the open gate.

No one stopped her or made challenge, but there was a delicious thrill of excitement in the possibility of interference, which kept her running till she was well up on the hill. When she came to the place where she had met her father and Thoma Kolomin the day before, she turned out of the path and went directly to the spot where they had stood. The snow was trampled there, and with a shy look around that she might be sure that no one would surprise her in the trick, she went and stood in the tracks which she knew had been made by Thoma Kolomin's feet.

It was cold comfort, however, and after a moment's self-indulgence, she slipped back into the path and began to descend the hill. The storehouse had been stripped so clean that it had not been thought worth while even to close the door. There was no one about the place and she went in and looked around, and coming back stood in the doorway to study the broad track made by the marauders which ran down frankly from the threshold to the beach.

The day was gray and the air heavy with the mist. The place was absolutely still and the girl grew suddenly conscious of the quiet, as if

it had been a weight. It was largely, of course, the fear for her lover which under all other things had, from the first, lain hidden in her heart. But the desolateness of the landscape, the pillaged house, the suggestion of hurried going in the trampled path, gave to her fear a new and sinister significance, and for the moment it overcame the cheerful curiosity that had brought her to the place, and drew the tears unbeckoned to her eyes.

“Thoma?” she called softly, and then stopped with parted lips. The sound of her voice, though, broke effectually the spell, and with a laugh at her own foolishness, she shook off the possession of her loneliness and turned her face back again toward home.

Even then she did not enter the stockade, but kept on along the river-bank toward the shelter and the boat-house where the messenger had hidden. Above them, she picked up her father's trail and, following it down, came to the scene of the struggle and the place where the inquisition had been held. She went over this with much of her old excitement and listened breathlessly at the door of the dark boat-house, though she did not venture in.

Then she remembered the fish, and the fact that it had not been brought away, and, with renewed thrills of speculation, advanced to the shelter, skirting it so as to come to it on its open side. She passed around the corner without a thought of danger in her heart. But scarcely was she in view of the interior when she stopped abruptly and, with a sharp ejaculation, fled back again around the angle of the house. Here she stood her ground, listening breathlessly and taking swift stock of the cause of her alarm.

“Who is there?” she called, and waited with her skirts in her hand, ready for instant flight. There was no answer, however, nor any other sign of life, and after a little, she plucked up courage and moved stealthily forward until she again could see. There was a man in the shelter, as she had thought, though he did not move or speak. The strong light in the place left no room for mistake, and recognizing who it was with the first good look, she went to him with an outcry and a rush.

It was Thoma Kolomin, and he had been trussed and tied and set up stiffly against the wall, with long sticks under his arms and knees

to prevent his rolling from his place. A gag of soft bark was in his mouth and between his knees, as if in derision, had been wedged the stolen fish. The girl swept it to one side and seized him in a close embrace.

“Thoma!” she cried. “Thoma! I thought you were never coming back!” She was half-way between tears and laughter, and, forgetting in her excitement that he had need of aid, she held him to her tightly, punctuating her joy with a series of breathless hugs. His dumbness under this treatment recalled her to a realization of his bondage and with fluttering hands she began to tug at the cords which held the gag.

“There, there!” she said soothingly, as if it were he instead of herself who must be encouraged to be calm. “In just a moment,—be still for just a moment and I shall have you free!” He kept his eyes fixed on her while she undid the cord, and as the gag fell away from his face, he took in his breath with a deep gasp of relief.

Sara Lukievna stood back and regarded him with her most engaging smile. But Thoma Kolomin had been too long in bond for sentiment and with scarcely a look at her busied

himself with working his tongue and trying the stiffened muscles of his face.

“Water,” he whispered, when he could form the word. The girl, with a wild look around for something which should serve her purpose as a cup, seized on a large clam-shell lying on the floor, and rushed away with it to the nearest stream. She nearly wept as she saw how hard it was for him to drink. Her arm went round his head and, drawing it against her, she held the shell to his lips, as if he had been a little child.

“You poor boy!” she said. “And I thought, all the time, that you were staying away because you believed things about me!” The water revived Thoma Kolomin, and he found a further interest in life.

“My hands,” he said huskily. She let go of him and stood back with a self-accusing cry.

“Forgive me!” she pleaded. “I forgot that you were tied.” She went down on her knees and began to fumble awkwardly at the leathern thongs around him. But the bonds were stiff and the knots cunningly devised and she made small progress toward getting them undone. He guessed that the work was beyond the limit

of her skill, and after a moment suggested another way.

“Take my knife and cut them,” he said.
“You will find it in the pocket of my blouse.”

“This one?” she asked.

“No. In the larger one on the other side.” She bent across him and inserted her hand in the designated place. Her whole attention was absorbed in the problem of how soonest to get him free. But the nearness of her, and the feeling of her hand against his side, as she fumbled in the pocket for the knife, stirred Thoma Kolomin to an unexpected thrill of sentiment, and leaning forward he let his head drop into the hollow of her shoulder and kissed her softly on the neck. The hand came out of his pocket with panicky haste and she straightened herself with a gasp. Then she bent down to him again and kissed him with an awkward little laugh.

“I forgot for the moment,” she said shyly.
“But I am glad to see that you do not think me altogether bad.” He kept his eyes fixed on her in evident contentment, but he added no corroboration of his forgiveness by word of mouth. She smiled upon him for a moment and then,

abstracting the knife, opened it and set to work upon the thongs.

It took small time to saw them through and, as they loosened, the imprisoned man drew his hands and legs cautiously free, flexing them and moving them stiffly backward and forward to make sure that they would work. Sara Lukieвна could not keep her hands off him and occupied herself with rubbing alternately his wrists and ankles, as opportunity allowed.

"Pavel Pavelovitch has told me all that happened last night, Thoma," she said solicitously. "Did you have to fight them all?" He paused in his rubbing long enough to look at her with puzzled inquiry, as if he did not understand.

"It was the man who robbed the trap and two others," he said in sullen justification. "I could not help being taken. The one fooled me into chasing him into this place and when I grappled with him the two others jumped on me from behind."

"Of course you could not help it," she assented sympathetically. "There is no one who could fight with three at once." He accepted this crumb of consolation in moody silence and the girl went hastily on. "But there must have

been more than three at the storehouse, Thoma. From the trail there were a dozen there at least."

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "I was not at the storehouse and I saw but three." She told him promptly all that had occurred and he listened with attentive face. Indeed, it came to her that the narration brought a light into his eyes which had not developed in the discussion of their more personal interests of the heart. She recognized, of course, that he no longer looked at her with anger or distrust, but somehow she found herself disturbed that he made no direct avowal of the fact.

It piqued her that after this, their first serious misunderstanding, he should come to reconciliation with so calm a face. The anguish she had suffered seemed to demand a more definitely proffered balm, and as they talked, in deference to this uneasiness, she found herself from time to time punctuating her narrative with openings which afforded him the chance to tell her really how he felt. But he either ignored or did not see them and her exasperation grew till she could wait no longer, but made shift to carry her point by direct assault.

The circulation had come back to Thoma Kolomin's legs and with assistance he got slowly to his feet. He tried himself to see if he could walk and then turned to Sara Luki-evna with impatience in his face.

"Come," he said, throwing his arm around her shoulders for support. "Let us get away from here. Twelve hours is enough when one has had nothing to do but think." She saw her opportunity and snuggling against his side, she slipped her arm as far as it would go around his waist.

"And during that time did you think sometimes of me?" she said shyly. He looked down at her from the corners of his eyes and there was just a suspicion of humor in his glance.

"Yes," he said gravely, "I thought of you a great deal."

"And what did you think?" she said more softly. "Was it good or bad?" He hesitated before answering and she hung her head.

"I faced the truth," he said sturdily. "I was not afraid." She raised her head proudly and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Then you must have had very pleasant thoughts," she said with unexpected spirit.

“They were not altogether bad,” he said with his slow smile. But Sara Lukievna had come to the point where she could stand no more equivocation. She twisted her shoulders out from under his arm and, slipping around in front of him, stopped him, with both hands on his breast.

“Thoma Kolomin,” she cried. “Give me an answer, yes or no. Did you sit tied up there all night long and think of me as you looked at me yesterday up there on the hill?” Even then his words came slowly, though this time she saw the twinkle in his eye.

“Why, of course not,” he said. “I overheard the men who tied me talking, and knew from what they said that it was your step-mother and not you who really was at fault.” To his surprise the answer seemed to excite instead of calm her, and she fairly jumped up and down and shook him with her hands.

“Did anybody ever see such a man!” she cried helplessly. “He has known ever since last night that he was wrong and even when he sees me he does not think to tell!”

“But I thought that you would know,” he protested feebly.

“Know!” she repeated. “How could I know you were going to meet the man?” He found no answer to the question, but stood looking at her so ruefully that her heart smote her and she laughed.

“But you were wrong, were you not?” she demanded. “You know it now?”

“Yes,” he assented meekly. “I was wrong.”

“Then I forgive you,” she cried magnanimously. “Only next time you must tell me the moment that you know.”

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN WHOM LUKA FOUND

Jealousy is as madly blind as love, and when Luka Strukof went out from the commandant's room, it was with scarcely less than murder in his heart. From the reading of the letter, he had definitely lost his hold on outside things, and his wife's denial, his own denunciation of her, which had not been planned, her wretchedness and fear, and the commandant's later pleadings that he would set aside his convictions and go to her again, all possessed him but as nightmares, which stood to cloud his righteous purpose of seeking out the cause of all the trouble and dealing out to him the summary justice which has been the betrayed man's right since the world began.

To get his hand personally on the offender—that was the one compensatory thing. This thought had persisted as a necessity through all the mad confusion of the struggle with his wife,

and now, in his going, it remained as the only clear and certain purpose in his mind. He paused on the lower floor of the house, long enough to possess himself of ammunition and a gun, and then, with eyes that saw nothing and ears that heard nothing but the mad tumult of his bitter thoughts within, he left the barrack behind him and set out upon his quest.

Without a look at his own house as he passed, he went out through the gate, and, taking the trail to the river, shaped a course across the ice which would take him to the blockhouse on the other side. He made no plans as to what would happen when he once was there. The way would come, and come quickly, if only he could find the man.

But the sharp air, the enforced exhilaration from his walk, and the bay-like stretch of the river, which made him long upon the way, all had a force, without his knowing it, to soothe and calm him, and bring him to a certain mastery of himself. The facts could not be changed for him, nor the pain of what he had been through. But the contact with nature clarified his vision and gave him a momentary respite from the rush of the many turbulent

emotions which had simultaneous hold upon his mind.

It could not change, of course, the deeper purpose in his heart. The clearing of the clouds simply left that standing out more strongly than before. But his other troubles became a background of distinctly less significance, and if he found a doubt to challenge the certainty of Lisa Fedorovna's guilt, it lay in the remembrance of her last assertion that it was Ivan Ignatich alone, whom she had gone out to the hill to meet. He knew who Ivan Ignatich was and even the wild unreasonableness of his suspicious mind balked at belief that Lisa Fedorovna's affections should have turned aside to him.

"We shall see though when I find him," he said grimly. "He shall tell me whether he was acting for himself."

There was no orderly arrangement about Konovalof's camp. Trees lay where they had been felled, a litter of equipage stood carelessly about, the trampled snow was brown with garbage and with filth, and so frankly heedless were the dwellers in the place, that when Luka Strukof came up the bank to the level of the

post, there was not a soul in sight to challenge him or forbid his entrance.

He stood for a moment undecided, looking from the angled tower to the two low shed-like buildings on the slope beyond. A sound of voices from the nearer place gave him a guiding clue, and striding across to it he pushed open the door and passed boldly in. The whole lower floor of the tower was in one open space and once inside he stopped abruptly and stood looking down the room.

At a long table, furnished and set for dinner, were seated perhaps twenty men. His intrusion had startled them and they rose up simultaneously, the benches behind them falling backward to the floor. Both sides stood gazing at each other in mutual amaze, but, as they recovered themselves, one of the twenty who had sat at the head of the table left his place and came menacingly toward Luka Strukof across the room.

"Who are you?" he demanded, but before the words were fairly out of his mouth another of the party ran forward with a shout and caught the speaker by the arm.

"Do not harm him!" he cried. "It is the

husband—the mad one! I claim him as my own.” It was the man who the previous day had been taken with the fish, and, slipping in front of his companion, he brought him fairly to a stop.

“Go back to your dinner,” he said laughingly. “He is not after you. Can you not see that he is alone?” The man resisted grumblingly, but finally turned back and the one who had interfered ran down the room to Luka Strukof with hand outstretched as to an expected guest.

“I thought you would come,” he declared cheerfully. “Ivan Ignatich told me yesterday that you arrived at the meeting-place too late.” Luka Strukof was too taken aback by his impetuosity to make immediate answer, but he drew his hands down with a distinct reserve. The other saw the movement and laughed joyously aloud. “Be magnanimous, man,—as I am,” he said. “I have never done you any harm, and it will not hurt you to shake me by the hand.” Luka Strukof hesitatingly extended his arm and the other met him with a hearty grasp.

“That is better,” he said. “I have harbored nothing against you. My grudge was against

your friend there who made me run. Have you found him yet?" he cried with sudden animation. Luka Strukof did not speak, but he slowly shook his head. "Well, you will then, when you go back," announced the other with the same swift volubility. "He is in the little shelter up there on the bank—and, yesterday being a fast day, we arranged him the fish for company." But Luka Strukof was in too deadly earnest to return pleasantry in kind. His eyes wandered impatiently to the group of men who were replacing their benches and returning to their meal. Not finding what he wanted, he came back to the man beside him with a direct demand.

"Where is Ivan Ignatich?" he asked abruptly. "He is the man I want." His companion shrugged his shoulders and lifted his hands in a gesture of mock regret.

"There you are again," he said cheerfully. "Luck certainly is not with you, friend. Ivan Ignatich is gone away." Luka Strukof's face remained a mask, but his excitement began to blaze fiercely in his eyes.

"Gone!" he echoed. "He was here last night."

“That is true. But eight hours ago he went out to Kenai by the trail, and by this time is on the boat for Iliamna on the other side. He told me he thought you might be here to-day,” he added with a grin. Luka Strukof’s disappointment rose up in him beyond controlling and he lifted his hand with a gesture of elemental rage.

“Damn him!” he cried. “May God for ever damn his ungracious soul!” His listener watched the outburst with unfeigned delight.

“That is right, if it relieves your mind,” he said approvingly. “It was a coward’s trick to sneak away without paying for his score.” He turned his attention to himself and began feeling in the pocket of his blouse. “He did not entirely forget the obligation, though,” he added. “He left you this letter which I was to give you when you came.” He extended the paper which Luka Strukof took with shaking hand. He looked the outside over stupidly and then, resting his gun against the wall, opened the missive feverishly and began to read.

“My esteemed friend,” it said; “I am very sorry that I can not wait until you come, but my

prudence tells me it is best to go away. The game for me is up, though not for the cause that you will think. I am not afraid of you and would have liked nothing better than to stop and give you the satisfaction of a fight, if it were not that in waiting I should have to have it out with at least one other besides you. The reason for my going lies with this other man. I shall not tell you who he is, because I do not want to discount beforehand the pleasure of your surprise. Ask for the stranger who arrived this evening, and he will tell you why I give up my pleasant arrangements with your wife. If you feel, as I fear you do from what I hear, that this thing has been a strain upon your peace, take the assurance, as an evidence of my gratitude, that there is absolutely no reason for you to doubt your wife. I have not been making love to her, my friend. She is too cold a sort for me. I like a woman who is not afraid to give. But as a provider, she has been worth my time and I give her the credit of being generous—at least, where your safety has been the price. With this your trouble stops. She made the payments for my silence, and naught else, and when you have settled with the

man I spoke of, there will be no further reason for my being bought.”

The letter stopped abruptly without signature, and when it was done, Luka Strukof stood with it in his hand, devouring it with his eyes, as if there must be something more to read. He turned it over and looked at the other side, and then, with a suspicious glance at the man who had given it to him, went through the screed again. The other followed his motions with frank interest and found his curiosity too strong to allow him to be still.

“Well, does it tell you what you want?” he demanded briskly. Luka Strukof’s eyes came up to his confusedly and he slowly shook his head.

“Who is the stranger who has come?” he asked. His companion’s quick wit carried him at once to a new conclusion in the case.

“So it was that man who really put our friend upon the road,” he said. “I know nothing of him except that, from the time he came, Ivan Ignatich took to cover and made haste to get away.” Luka Strukof interrupted with an impatient gesture of his hand.

“Where is the man now?” he demanded.

“He was here for dinner, till a moment before you came. I think you will find him in the farther of the two houses in the rear.”

“I will go to him,” returned the other grimly, and reached behind him for his gun. The action had so sinister a significance that the other man misunderstood.

“All right,” he assented cheerfully. “Go there and kill him, if you want to. No one knows him or is especially interested in him here.” He made a motion forward that was a proffer of accompaniment, as Luka Strukof laid his hand upon the door, but the latter stopped him with a word.

“It is better that I go alone,” he said hastily. “I shall come back here after it is done.” The other stopped reluctantly and renounced his purpose with a shrug.

“Have it your way,” he said. “I suppose, after all, it is your own affair.” Luka Strukof waited no longer, but went promptly out. His companion remained true to his promise and accompanied him no farther than the door. Yet, parted from the object of his interest, he did not at once return into the house, but stood

looking after him with a face whose expression showed a whimsical mixture of amusement and regret, and so remained until Luka Strukof disappeared into the house to which he had been sent.

Coming into it from the open, the latter could make out little except that the walls of the new barrack were lined with rolls of bedding, and that a confusion of clothes and other litter lay on the floor between. At first, he thought there was no one in the place, but as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, he realized that something, scarcely more than a shadow, was moving, down toward the farther limit of the gloom.

He advanced some steps into the apartment, and saw that the figure was that of a man with his back toward him, bending down in the process of taking a garment from a leathern sack for clothes. He went on farther, and the noise of his coming announced him to the man before him, so that he rose from his stooping position and turned around to look.

The recognition was instantaneous on both sides. The stranger moved forward a step impulsively and then stood still. But Luka

Strukof cried aloud, as if in sudden fear, and, leaning out for a better view, fixed his eyes on the figure which confronted him, with a look of fascinated horror which held him rooted to his place.

“Egor!” he cried under his breath. “Egor!” His whole body began to shake as if he had a palsy, and his grasp slackened so that his gun slipped clattering to the floor. He was not conscious of its fall, however, and, lifting a trembling hand, he began crossing himself with monotonous regularity. The other did not find it in his plan to move or break the silence, and after a moment the strain of waiting proved too much for Luka Strukof and he spoke again.

“I have not touched her!” he cried sharply. “Why can you not rest quiet in your grave?” The apparition threw out its hands with a sudden gesture of impatience and began to move toward him down the room. Luka Strukof’s fear became a panic and he crossed himself more vigorously than before. He looked back wildly to one side and the other as if meditating flight, but his courage held so that he stood his ground, though his livid face and trembling knees proclaimed the effort it required. The

end of endurance came, however, while the object of his fear was still outside his touch, and he threw up his hand with such compelling protest that the other stopped short where he was.

"Stand back!" he cried, his voice rising almost to a scream. "I will take no punishment at your hand. I tell you I have never taken her for myself at all." The other's face remained inscrutable, though he made no motion to come farther forward.

"Be still!" he said curtly. "I am not dead, and, without fighting specters, you have more than enough to answer to me for, as a living man." He was younger than Luka Strukof and more dark, but as they stood there in the half-light, there was so strong a family resemblance between them that anywhere it would have proclaimed them kin. The announcement came to Luka Strukof with a shock even greater than that which had moved him when he had thought his visitor a ghost.

"Not dead!" he repeated stupidly. "Not dead!" and then as the truth became a certainty for him, and he remembered what had come to him to bear and to suffer because for so many months he had believed the other way, his world

began to slip dizzily away from him and he cried out bitterly aloud.

"O my God!" he said, and, swaying in his place, he groped out blindly with his hands. The other misinterpreted both the action and the cry and stepped quickly back.

"Do not touch me!" he cried sharply. "It will go hard with you if you try to kill me now." He had held his arm down stiffly at his side, but, as he moved, it could be seen that he had a pistol in his hand. Luka Strukof's face flushed furiously, but no resentful answer rose up on his tongue.

"Believe me, I have no such thought," he said brokenly. "From the day I knew that you were dead, there has never been a time when I would not willingly have given up my own life if, by doing so, I could have returned you yours." The other listened with evident disbelief.

"I do not see why I do not kill you," he said coldly. "It is what I came all this way to do. If you had not spoken so quickly when you first saw me, I should have done it then. But you said that you had never taken Lisa to you as a wife, and it has made me stop. Tell me, before

we go further, where she is." Luka Strukof's face grew suddenly crafty, and he spoke with more reserve.

"Kill me, if you like," he said humbly. "Perhaps I owe you my life, though it is a true word that, if I had known what I was doing that other time, I should never have attempted yours. But why should you do Lisa harm? She could not help it that she cared for me." The other drew in his breath with a sharp gasp of protest, and his mouth twitched so convulsively that his words were almost unintelligible as he spoke.

"It is a lie!" he cried with a conviction that was pathetically a hope. "She was not willing. You were my brother, and I trusted you with her and you took her away from me by force!" Luka Strukof's face relaxed to its old look of despairing vacancy, and he passed his hand uncertainly across his eyes.

"God knows that of myself I do not know," he said solemnly. "I have to guide me only what was told me after it occurred. But I did not force Lisa to come here with me against her will. She did that on her own decision and only because she wished." The younger man broke

in on him almost before the words had left his mouth.

"I do not believe it!" he cried. "Let me see her for myself and she will talk a different way." But Luka Strukof was equally stubborn in his turn.

"You shall not see her," he said with prompt decision, "until you promise not to do her harm." The other stood in manifest indecision, and it was plain that his desire to see again the woman whom he loved was pushing hard his instinct toward revenge. He lifted his arm and looked moodily at the pistol which remained balanced irresolutely in his open hand.

"What a weakling I am!" he said as if to himself. Then, with a softening of expression which ran both to figure and to face, he tossed the pistol on to the nearest bed and turned to his brother, all his emotion shining in his eyes.

"Luka," he said huskily, "you have not succeeded in taking Lisa for yourself. Will you be content to let her come to me, if she tells you now that, after all, she cares more for me than she does for you?" It was a question the very contemplation of which turned Luka

Strukof faint, and his face flushed angrily as he took it in.

“What is the use to promise?” he said roughly. “If there was uncertainty about it in those days, there is absolutely none, now that I have her heart.” The other cried out with a sharp note of pain.

“If you are so certain, you surely should not be afraid!” he urged with eager volubility. “Give me my chance, man. At the very least, you owe me that!” Luka Strukof looked at him for a moment with wistful calculation in his eyes.

“And if she decides against you,” he said searchingly, “will you, too, abide by the result?” It was Egor Strukof’s turn to hesitate, and the stress of decision blanched his face. Twice he essayed speech, but each time checked himself before the words dropped from his mouth. Then, with a sharp out-breathing, he made up his mind.

“What have I but the chance!” he cried brokenly, and lifted up his hands. “I swear to you before God,” he went on solemnly, “that whichever way it goes for me, I will accept her choosing, and it shall be the end!”

“God hold me to like word!” returned his brother, and, without further ceremony, stooped and picked up his gun. “Lisa is at Kussilof, just across the river,” he added quietly. “If you are ready, I will take you to her now.”

CHAPTER XIII

LISA'S STORY

When Sara Lukievna came finally to the house at the gate, it was with a face that was both radiant and clear. Her only qualm lay in the guilty realization that she had taken so much time in helping Akoulina Fedosyevna look after Thoma Kolomin's needs that it was already well past noon. The dereliction, however, premised no damage that was really beyond repair, and with a heart that was at peace with all the world, she opened the outside door and passed in.

The kitchen and the living-room were empty, and she paused for a moment before the door of her stepmother's room and listened to see if Lisa Fedorovna was within. There was no sound to indicate her presence and, after a moment's hesitation, the girl tapped lightly on the panels and, without waiting for an answer, gently tried the latch.

It answered readily to her touch and she passed in unheralded and softly closed the door. Her stepmother was lying on the bed across the room in much the same attitude that she had been when Sara Lukievna first saw her in the place. This time, however, the interruption gave her no impetus to rise and she let herself lie in full abandon on the covers, her face turned resolutely to the wall.

The girl stood looking breathlessly at her for an instant and then went swiftly to her across the room. Seating herself on the edge of the bed, she bent above the prostrate woman and laid her cheek sympathetically against hers. Lisa Fedorovna paid no attention to the gentle ministration, though she did not remonstrate or try to draw away. But the pressure of the girl's warm flesh and her unobtrusive sympathy went unerringly to her heart and after a little, her breath began to draw in audibly in convulsive sobs and the tears to run stealthily down her cheeks. The girl's own eyes grew perilously moist and she pressed the older woman closely in her arms.

"There, there!" she whispered soothingly. "It will not make it better that you cry." But

Lisa Fedorovna's heart was still too sore to bear unflinchingly so direct a touch. She stirred in her place and, pushing the girl aside, got up and began walking nervously up and down the room. Sara Lukievna remained where she was and followed her movements with sympathetic eyes.

Lisa Fedorovna paced swiftly back and forth, her head erect and her eyes fixed staringly on space. She moved with tireless activity and turned where the walls set the limit to the beat, with the precision of a restless animal in its cage. She continued at this so long that Sara Lukievna became uneasy. But before she could determine how best to interfere, Lisa Fedorovna stopped suddenly in her march and, coming back to the bed, stood in front of her with almost defiant eyes.

"I am going to tell you," she said abruptly. "I did not think that I should ever speak of it to any one without Luka's word. But you know more about the matter now than any besides us, and I must tell some one or I believe I shall go mad."

She waited again for a time that seemed interminable to the impatient girl, as if, after all,

the thing was still too secret with her to be told. When she did speak, it was hurriedly, as if there lurked furtively in her the fear that, before she finished, she would be called upon to stop.

"Do you remember," she said at last, slowly, "that I once told you that when your father first came to me, he thought me another than myself?"

"Yes," assented the girl promptly.

"And that when I went away with him, he still thought me your mother and called me by her name?"

"Yes." The older woman's lips drew together and she held her breath as if uncertain what next to say.

"There was one thing I did not tell you at that time," she began again abruptly. "You know that your father had a brother?" The girl's eyes were fixed on Lisa Fedorovna's face and she gravely nodded her head.

"I have heard so," she said, "though he has not spoken of him for years."

"It was to his house in Aldansk that your father came when he went back to the other side," went on the older woman quickly. She

paused again with the same tense compression of the lips. "What I did not tell you before was," she said at last, "that at the time he came, his brother cared for me and wanted me and my father had promised me to him as his wife." She stopped abruptly on the declaration and fixed her eyes challengingly on Sara Lukievna, as if she expected from her some outburst of protest or surprise. But the girl's face remained turned to her with no change in its attentive expectation and, beyond a quickening in her breathing, gave no sign of the excitement which was stirring her within. Lisa Fedorovna's eyes went away from her again and her face softened as the memories began to stir.

"I can see Luka now as he was the first day that he came," she said softly. "His brother brought him to the house and I remember thinking how very like they were in looks, only that Luka was more slender and had more lines of trouble in his face. I was curious about him, of course, because he was Egor's brother, though I thought nothing further of him at the time. But from the first moment he came in, I saw him watching me with a curious, attentive

look, and, without waiting to be brought, he came to me and put out both his hands.

“‘I knew you would be here,’ he said. ‘I have never doubted it, since you came to me there in Kussilof.’ It was so strange a greeting, coming before them all, that it frightened me and I would not let him take my hands. But when I spoke about it to Egor—your uncle—he only laughed.

“‘You must humor him,’ he said. ‘Luka is harmless. It is the only thing on which he is wrong-headed. He thinks you are his wife.’ And then he told me the story of your mother’s death.” She stopped for a moment, with something that was very like a sob.

“‘I suppose it was pity that began it,’” she said when she could again bring herself to speak. “‘I know I did not love him for a long time after that. In fact, I was afraid of him and avoided him where I could. But Luka himself never doubted after that first look. He was never insistent, nor disturbed because I did not understand. He never asked me to care for him, or said the other things one would naturally expect. But I never turned around without finding him at my elbow; there was nothing

for my pleasure or comfort so small that he did not remember it and provide, and always there was in his eyes that wonderful look which made me conscious that he believed me the only thing worth while to him in life.

“ ‘No, you are Kovya,’ was all the answer I ever got from him when I tried to make him understand. What could I do when he assumed like that? But there never was a time when I realized that there was anything more intimate than this between us, and how it changed and grew I do not know.

“When the time came finally for my marriage, like a flash it came to me how closely he had grown into my life. He could not but observe the preparations going on, and I suppose some under sense made plain to him what consciously he did not see. For from the moment of their beginning, he was uneasy and three days before the time for me to stand beneath the crown, he waylaid me under the trees outside as I was going home. He had never touched me before, as a lover would, but that night he put his arms around me as if he had always had the right, and drew me close against him as he talked.

“‘Kovya,’ he said, ‘the word has come to me, and to-night we shall begin our journey home.’” In spite of her wild interest Sara Lukievna could not forbear to speak.

“But he called you Kovya,” she broke in protestingly. “Did you not understand how it was with him from that?”

“No,” said Lisa Fedorovna slowly. “And perhaps it is not so strange, after all, that I let it pass. You see, he had been calling me Kovya for so long a time. When he first did it, I hated it and spoke to him about it, so that he might see that he was wrong. I became used to it finally, as I did to all the rest, and I believe that, by the time the end came, I had even forgotten that Kovya was not some particular love name he had picked out to call me by, because he liked it better than my own.

“But that night, it did not even come to me as strange that he should take me and hold me in his arms. He had never done it before and I do not remember that I had ever even wondered if he would. But when he did, and spoke to me in that way, I turned as mad as he was, I suppose. For like a flash, all my blindness fell away from me and it grew plain to me as day-

light that the only place where I could ever be truly happy in this world was in the sheltering circle of his arms." She held her breath for a moment and then let it go out sharply in a sigh.

"I suppose that you are shocked that I did not feel more responsibility that Egor was so badly served. You see, while Egor did have my promise that I would be his wife, it was my father's match, not mine. I do not mean that I could have married him like a peasant woman, without any love at all. But he was not distasteful to me, there was no other man, and I thought I should come to care for him in time.

"I should surely have kept my promise if Luka had not come. But as I measure the two of them after all this time, I think I understand how it was that I turned so naturally to the one I did. Egor was different in the way he cared. He admired me, of course, and I suppose, too, that he had passion for me and looked forward to the time when I should be his own. But, like most Russian girls, I was going to him on a bargain made with my father rather than with me, and I suppose it never occurred to him that there was anything more expected of him than the strict letter of the bond.

“He felt the duty to see that I was decently amused, and gave me presents and was often close at my side. But beyond these things, he never sought to know what was really in my heart and, in fact, I suspect it never occurred to him to try.

“But with Luka it was all the other way. He never gave me presents. He never made me a compliment in his life. But I had from him instead that which no man before had ever offered me—a place in the inmost corner of his heart. It was his soul that he put into my hands and my soul had no choice but to answer to the call. As I have said, he never openly advanced a claim, but his love was through me and around me and about me, until, before the end, I could not even have a thought without feeling that somehow he had in it a part. And there you have the whole reason for my choice. The one man had my promise, the other had my heart. What would you have done if you had been in my place?” She stopped abruptly and there was a suspicious tremble in her voice. Sara Lukievna made no effort to reply, but her hands went out with involuntary sympathy and she stood touching Lisa Fedorovna comfort-

ingly till after a moment's pause she began again to speak.

"Oh, what a mad night it was!" she said. "And the maddest thing about it, even now, is that I turned to him that way when he spoke to me, without a hesitation or a doubt. Somehow, there was not even a question about it in my mind. I answered because it seemed the only thing to do.

" 'I will go,' I said, 'but it can not be to-night.' He did not yield as he had done at other times and let me have my way.

" 'No,' he said, 'it is ordered and we have now no choice.' I was not so blind but I could see advantage in his plan. It took small thought to tell me what trouble there would be when Egor and my father came to know. There was the chance, to be sure, that they would let me go. But it was a desperate chance and, if my father chose to force me, of course that would have been the end. But, for all that, I could not steal away and leave them that way without a word, so I braced myself to struggle with Luka and bring him to my wish.

" 'Surely I have given all that you could ask to-night,' I said. 'About the rest, you must be

patient and wait till I can work it out my way.'

" 'But the man is waiting with the horses, yonder at the bridge,' he answered. 'I told him we would come as soon as you were prepared.'

" 'No, not to-night,' I said. 'It would not be right to Egor or the rest!' I must have spoken louder than I knew, for out of the dark there came an answer, like an echo to my words.

" 'What will not be right to me?' it said, and before I could collect myself or even escape from Luka's arms, Egor himself was upon us, coming to us out of the shadows like a ghost. I knew that he had been away all day at work among his cattle, and he was still in his rough clothes and carried his short-handled whip.

"He stopped abruptly and looked at us in manifest surprise. But Luka's conviction that his wife was yet alive was so well established with him, that, when he made his protest, it was not to him but me.

" 'This is going far, Lisa,' he said coldly. 'What does it all mean?' My mouth was dry and I found no word to say. But Luka took up my battle and answered for us both. He still detained me closely in his arms and, when

he spoke, it was across my shoulder, with the assumption of perfect right.

“ ‘The call has come to us,’ he said calmly. ‘We were preparing to go away.’ Egor listened to him with a bewildered air till he was through, and then he laughed.

“ ‘It is worth while to you that I bear your disability so clear in mind,’ he said dryly. ‘Otherwise, I should be jealous, I am afraid.’ He waited to see me released and free again, but Luka had caught some breath of Egor’s own irritation and stood his ground, his eyes fixed watchfully on his brother’s face.

“ ‘Let us have an end to this foolishness,’ said Egor roughly. ‘Have you, too, gone mad?’ I do not know what power it was that gave me courage, but I felt the uplift stir in me so that I dared to speak.

“ ‘I am not sure,’ I said. ‘But I have told him I would go.’ The announcement was so unexpected that, for the moment, he was fairly dazed. But his eyes went away from me to Luka and when he spoke it was to turn his whole anger against him.

“ ‘So you are not the mad fool that I thought you!’ he cried. ‘Before God, you shall

answer for every jot that you have tampered with her faith!' He raised his whip as if about to strike and Luka met him on the word. Swinging me behind him so that he stood between, he faced his brother fearlessly, his eyes afire with menace and his hand thrust down into the deep pocket of his blouse.

" 'Take care!' he cried. 'If you touch her, I shall know how to defend my own!' His frank assumption of possession stirred Egor out of all control.

" 'Your own!' he cried. 'There will be a score to pay before such claim has truth! Take that and that as earnest of the price!' His arm was up and, like a flash, he brought the lash of the whip down twice across Luka's face.

"It was hard to follow what happened after that. I saw them grapple and heard their breathing and the trample of their feet as they swayed backward and forward among the trees. Then, as they came where the light was better in a clearer space, I saw that each had the other by a wrist and held so grimly that neither one could strike. Egor made shift to use the handle of his whip, but Luka in his free hand held a knife.

“They strained at each other silently, for neither had the breath to speak. I found myself bending and resisting as they did, though I stood so far away, and it was an agony to me that Egor was the stronger and pushed Luka back. They made an end at last, but when it came it was so sudden that I scarcely understood. Egor’s strength served him so that he pushed his brother to his knees. With a sudden twist he wrenched free his arms and I saw him bring the heavy whip butt down on Luka’s head. At the same moment Luka lunged forward with the knife and, as if with the one impulse, both men went down together to the ground.

“It was so suddenly still after the confusion of the battle, that for a moment I stood breathless in my place. The noise of it, while it was going on, had seemed enough to alarm the whole world around us, and now that it was done I waited with my heart in my mouth for the people who had heard to come. But there was not so much as a call in answer, and even Egor and Luka lay quiet on the ground.

“But that was only for the instant. A devouring need to know how it had fared with them brought me sharply from my panic, and I

went to them with a rush. The heart dropped out of me completely as I knelt by Luka's side. My hands shook so that I could scarcely place them and I saw him only through a mist of tears. He was alive, thank God, though unconscious from the blow of the heavy whip. There was a long gash where it had struck him, and as I lifted his head I felt the blood from it run warm across my hands. Egor neither moved nor breathed, and I needed nothing further than my eyes to tell me that the knife had reached him in some vital part.

"How long I sat there holding Luka in my arms I do not know. At first I was simply dazed and had no memory, except perhaps the foolish thought that, by so doing, I was keeping him from slipping out of life. But, step by step, the horror of it grew till I was all clear-headed and a-quake and set myself miserably to plan what I should do.

"The thing I longed for most was that Luka should have help. But there the problem met me that if I sought it, there could be no hiding of his brother's death. And in Egor's own town I knew what punishment would be meted out to Luka, if they helped him and he lived.

The only safety I could think of lay in getting him away, and blessedly there came to me the memory of the arrangement for our going and the man who waited with the horses at the bridge.

“I could not bear to touch Egor, but God gave me strength so that I lifted Luka and dragged him to where the man could take him without finding out the rest. He was frightened when he saw him, but he had pity on me in the end and between us we put him in the troika and got away without raising an alarm.

“It was a strange ride out there in the night! I was going away with Luka, as he had said I would, though Heaven knows it was not because I wished it or was following Luka’s plan. I had to go. There was no other thing to do, and, as the miles were left behind, over and over with growing force there pressed on me the conviction that we were simply helpless in the hands of fate and moving in answer to a call.

“The driver was good to me, and helped me as he could. When he finally left me, he got me new horses and a surgeon for Luka’s wound. But I would wait only until the cut was cleansed and bound; then, with his head on my lap, I

put forty versts between us and the accursed place that I had left. I would have put more, only I was afraid for him.

“I have forgotten the name of the town to which we came. It was called Khalm, or something of that sort. For me there is no recollection of it, save as a whitewashed room with scarcely a furnishing beyond the paper icon on the wall, and a man in bed, who could not move and who groaned and babbled in delirium when the stupor broke so that he talked at all.

“Oh, the unspeakable loneliness of those days! I can not tell whether it was more dreadful at high noon or at night. In both, I was equally alone, for people were suspicious of my story and came neither to sympathize nor to blame. I sat for days without a sound about me but Luka's breathing and the noise of the flies as they drummed against the windows or stirred in the circle of light above the lamp!

“I had full time to think on all that had gone before. No one from Aldansk sought me out, and I have never heard from my father or the others from that day. Toward the end, the only thing which kept me from going wholly mad was that I could see Luka growing better

as I watched, and knew that the time was coming when he would open his eyes and know me and I should hear him speak my name. I thought for days what he would say when he turned to me with that first glance of recognition in his eyes. And then, as suddenly as if I had not expected it, it came.

“I was standing by the window, with my back turned to the bed, looking out at a line of caravan horses which were being driven in from some country to the south, and suddenly the feeling came to me that something had happened in the room. I felt it must be Luka, and my nerves began to tingle and my pulses to dance, so that I was afraid to look around at him, lest the excitement of my joy should show so strongly that it would come to him as a shock.

“I forced myself to turn slowly, as if nothing had occurred, and sure enough, his eyes were open and he was looking at me with a glance that was as clear and limpid as a child’s. I made myself move slowly as I went to him, though my heart was jumping so that I was sure that he would hear.

“ ‘What is it, Luka?’ I said and put my hand

against his cheek. He continued to gaze at me with the look of solemn steadiness which weakness puts into the eyes, and made the effort to make known his wish.

“ ‘I want Kovya,’ he said slowly. I bent down to him and kissed him on the lips.

“ ‘Why, I am Kovya,’ I said, though the awful suspicion stirred in me that perhaps, after all, he was not yet himself. He considered for a moment, letting his lids fall so that I could not see his eyes.

“ ‘No,’ he said without opening them again, ‘I want Kovya, my wife.’ My heart went down like lead that he did not know me, but it was something that he had spoken, and I tried to console myself with that. But when, after an hour of rest, he woke again, it was with the same demand upon his lips. And so again, till I could no longer hide from myself that he was surely in his mind and understood, and I determined to tell to him the truth.

“ ‘I am not really Kovya, you know, but Lisa, whom you call Kovya, and took in Kovya’s stead,’ I said, the next time that he asked. I would have given worlds to hear him say, ‘No, you are Kovya,’ as he had always done when I

denied the name to him before. But this time he looked at me with eyes that had in them an inquiry that was very near to fear.

“ ‘I do not know you,’ he said wearily and turned away his face. Even then I could not believe, and comforted myself with the delusion that when he became really conscious he would know me as before.

“ ‘Where is Kovya, then?’ he asked after a little.

“ ‘Do you not remember?’ I said. ‘She died at Kussilof before you came away.’ He lay and considered this silently, and after a moment the tears began to run from between his closed lids.

“ ‘Then they were right,’ he said slowly. ‘They told me that, but I did not believe that it was true.’ He did not question further and I did not urge him to go on. I was eager in fact to wait, for my only hope lay in the fact that, as he grew stronger, his mind would grow more clear.

“ ‘I told you how dreadful the loneliness was for me when I first brought him to the place. But God knows it was as nothing to the horror of that later time! Oh, Sara, it was all true

as I had feared. The blow or the sickness which followed, had, in some secret way, unwound the tangle of delusion in his mind, and set him back to where he had been when he received the initial shock. What came between was all a blank to him, and I had even to tell to him my name!"

Sara Lukievna in her interest had drawn nearer to Lisa Fedorovna until her arms were round her and, as she paused, they stood crying together breast to breast. But Lisa Fedorovna was torn so bitterly by her despair that she could not remain sanely still. She unclasped the girl's arms with sudden roughness, and almost frantically pushed her back.

"Let me go!" she panted. "I can not breathe when you cling to me like that!" Then the vane went round again and she caught the girl tightly in her arms. "Forgive me," she cried. "I have drunk so deep of the cup of shame that sometimes its bitterness is too much for me to hold." She bent her head till it lay against the other's hair, and the contact soothed her so that presently she spoke again.

"Let me tell you the rest," she said. "It will not take me long now. There could be no

mistake for me after I understood. Fate had made me a stranger to Luka and I tried to keep a stranger's place. At first it was hard not to touch him and take care of him as I had done before, and more than once I forgot and kissed him when he was asleep.

“But he knew from the first that I was no ordinary stranger and his eyes followed me continually with such perplexity and wistful inquiry that they almost drove me mad. I did not dare to tell him when he was so weak, but as he grew stronger, he demanded more and more, until one day when he was dressed again and sitting by the window in the sun, I plucked up courage and told him the whole bitter story from the beginning to the end. He did not speak or look at me, but, when it was done, he reached across and put his hand down on mine—and my heart stood still, for in spite of what had happened, it seemed impossible that he should not go on and speak and tell me that he loved me as he had done before.

“‘You are a brave woman,’ he said, and in his voice there was such a quiver of sympathy—and nothing more—that I could not bear it, and sprang up and got away while I could yet

keep check upon my tears. But later, when we were both more calm, he came to me and stood in front of me and put out both his hands.

“ ‘It is a strange tangle which fate has made of our two lives,’ he said, ‘and the story is all so new to me that I am not yet altogether certain what it is right that we should do. I wish that I could say to you now that I love you, as you tell me I did before this trouble came. But whatever it was that brought me so unexpectedly into your life, it has seen fit to take me as rudely out again, and all I can now say to you is this: what I did was done innocently, not knowing, and I am sorry that it should be so from the bottom of my heart. I have it on my soul that my brother is dead by my hand, and that, wittingly or unwittingly, I did it for your sake. That of itself would always stand as a barrier between us, if I thought to take you as a wife. But there seems no doubt but God wishes it that we should remain together for the time at least, and I can think now of nothing better for us to do than to follow the command. The road is closed which would take you back to your old life. Let us go on together till we see, and make what we can of what is left to us.

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No one need know that we are not man and wife, and, God willing, I will give to you, so far as lies in my power, the happiness that would have been yours if I had not come like a thief into your old life and taken it away.'

"I had no strength to urge a different course. There was no doubt but Egor was dead and that the door was closed against me in my father's house. But more it weighed with me that, though we were thus cruelly set apart, in my heart, at least, I was really Luka's wife, and, feeling so, there was no other place in the world for me except at his side. So I agreed as bravely as I could, and, when he was strong enough, we began the journey here.

"The rest you know, for in it you have had a part. But this perhaps you have not understood. God has granted me the one consolation that I wished. In the months that have passed, He has touched your father's heart so that it has turned to me, and he has really come to love me for myself. Not with the old love which gave me place because he thought I was your mother come again. That went with his awakening, never to return. The new love came because he needed me, and could not do

without. I did not seek it, and, for a long time, I was afraid to trust it when it came. But your father does not do things by halves and, when he made up his mind, he came to me and opened again for me the door of the Heaven which he had closed before." She spoke with a conscious accession of dignity, and her head lifted with a pathetic touch of pride.

"He loves me now," she said, "as he did your mother in the older days—and that, as you know, was with the full strength of his heart."

"But," said the girl eagerly, "why did you go out to meet with Ivan Ignatich, as you did?"

"Can you not see? Ivan Ignatich was Egor's clerk at home. He knew, of course, all that had occurred. I went to pay him so he would not tell."

"But the letter!" cried the girl. "It was not one of business, but of love." The look of exaltation faded from Lisa Fedorovna's face, and she turned to Sara Lukievna with her old sorrowful look.

"Did you believe it of me, too?" she said. "What is there wrong with me that every one should be so sure I am untrue?"

"Oh, no!" cried the girl. "I did not think

of that. No one who really knows you could be so blind!" Lisa Fedorovna's eyes softened and she bent her glance to Sara Lukievna with a misty smile.

"But Pavel Pavelovitch did," she said helplessly, "and Luka himself was so sure of it that he shamed me before your foster father, and would not even let me tell him how it was." Sara Lukievna's curiosity caught at the new idea.

"Shamed you?" she repeated. "I did not know of that!"

"Yes. He told the commandant that he had cast me off—that I had no claim on him because I was not his wife." The girl's mouth opened, and her eyes began to blaze.

"Oh, how could he! How could he!" she cried indignantly. "A stone would have had more heart!" Then her swift temper mastered her, and she turned to Lisa Fedorovna with a fierce demand. "What did you say to him?" she cried. "Did you tell him what you thought?" Lisa Fedorovna's face flushed and she helplessly shook her head.

"No," she said. "It was Luka's secret. I did not feel I had the right."

"Well, I should!" burst out the girl excitedly. "I would die before I would let any man talk to me like that!" Lisa Fedorovna's eyes fell.

"Luka has been very good to me," she said, "and I am afraid I was not thinking of much except how best to make him understand."

"Oh," cried the girl with tardy justice. "It was he, not you, who was in the wrong. When he comes back, even if you do not, I shall tell him what I think." Lisa Fedorovna caught only at two words.

"Comes back!" she cried. "Where has Luka gone?" The answer rose on Sara Lukievna's tongue, but before it was out she bethought her what the news might mean to Lisa Fedorovna in her present excited mood, and abandoned the answer half-way on her lips.

"Why, he has gone—" she said, and stopped so abruptly that Lisa Fedorovna could not help but read the story in her face.

"You are keeping something from me!" she cried. "Where is it that he has gone?" Sara Lukievna weighed the chances swiftly and could think of nothing better than the truth.

"I do not know, myself," she said with

reluctance, "but Pavel Pavelovitch said that he had gone across the river to the other post."

"Did Pavel Pavelovitch send him? Why did he go?" The girl temporized, delaying the disclosure as long as she could.

"Oh, no!" she declared eagerly. "Pavel Pavelovitch did not send him. He tried to hold him back!" Lisa Fedorovna's face showed that she had guessed the truth and understood, but her courage refused to accept the hazard till she had corroboration from the other's lips.

"No, tell me!" she cried. "What was it he went there to do?" The girl answered without equivocation, though she threw out her hand as if to parry the attack which must come when the woman before her understood.

"Lisa," she said tremulously, "I am afraid he went over there to fight with the man with whom you had been meeting on this side." But the older woman scarcely waited for the end. Before the words were out of Sara Lukievna's mouth, she was across the room and busying herself with putting on her hood. Sara Lukievna followed her and put her hand upon her arm.

"There is no need to go," she said sooth-

ingly. "Pavel Pavelovitch sent a man after him almost at once, and in the fog you will simply pass them on the way." But Lisa Fedorovna was too broken nervously to remain tamely still.

"I can not wait! I can not!" she cried convulsively. "There must be no more bloodshed between him and me!" Sara Lukievna entreated helplessly, but Lisa Fedorovna continued her preparations with unabated haste. But her trembling hands were still busy with the wraps when there was a noise in the room without and the sound of entering feet. The girl caught at the interruption eagerly and put up her hand.

"Listen!" she cried so sharply that Lisa Fedorovna stopped. There was a breathless moment of suspense, and then, distinct and beyond mistaking, Sara Lukievna heard her father's voice outside the door.

"Lisa," it said, "Lisa, where are you? May I come in?" The tone was boyishly eager and expectant, and so different from the hard bitterness with which he had addressed Lisa Fedorovna when she saw him last, that the recognition of it turned her faint. The girl, too,

caught the kindlier intonation, and sprang to her with a little cry of joy. Lisa Fedorovna's hands were shaking and the things she was holding went down unnoticed to the floor.

"Come in," she said faintly. "I am here." The answer scarcely carried across the room, but the man outside was too impatient to delay for lack of summons, and, after a moment's waiting, opened the door narrowly and looked in. Sara Lukievna gave back so that the older woman stood alone. Lisa Fedorovna spoke again and the waiting man entered, pausing when he was once inside to look searchingly about the room. His brother was with him and followed close behind. Luka Antonovitch stood at rest in his place till he was sure of all about him, his head erect and his face transfigured by an inner joy that was too deep to hide. Then with a sharp in-drawing of his breath, his arms lifted and he came swiftly across to where Lisa Fedorovna stood.

"Lisa," he cried, "the door is opened for us! God Himself has taken away the bar!" He would have caught her in his arms, but the habit of denial was still strong upon her, and she held him away from her with her hands.

He accepted the repulse meekly, and, dropping at her feet, lifted the hem of her skirt till it lay reverently against his lips. Unconsciously Lisa Fedorovna's hands went down till they pressed his head on either side, but her eyes were beyond him and fixed on the man across the room.

"Luka!" she cried sharply. "Who is that man yonder—the one that just came in?" He remembered then that he had not told her, and rose quickly to his feet.

"It is Egor," he said solemnly. "God spared him there at Aldansk so that he did not die." She found the thing too sudden for belief and continued to gaze fixedly with the same look of incredulity and terror in her eyes.

"Then you are really Egor?" she said at last. "It is true that you are still alive?" The man addressed gasped at the sound of her voice, and made a half unconscious gesture of assent.

"Yes, I am Egor," he said hoarsely. "It is true that I am not dead." He came forward as he spoke until he could have touched her where she stood. "God is good to me that He has let me come to you again," he said wistfully. She instinctively gave back a little and did not seem to see the hand that he held out.

“Why did you come?” she said at last. Egor Strukof’s face darkened and he let his breath go out in a bitter little laugh.

“Is it so strange a thing,” he said, “that a man should take trouble to be with the woman to whom he is betrothed?” The question came to the two before him like a cold wind blown, and even Luka Strukof’s eager face sobered as he took in the meaning of the words. Lisa Fedorovna’s eyes remained fixed unflinchingly on those of the speaker, but after a moment her hand went out and groped about till it took hold on Luka Strukof’s sleeve.

“The girl to whom you were betrothed is not here, Egor,” she began earnestly. “It has been a long time since then, and out of what has come to me I have grown into something entirely other than the woman you knew there at home.” He broke in on her with a fierce out-rolling gesture of the hand.

“Change or no change,” he cried, “you are still the person who promised she would marry me and who made oath upon her word.”

“Yes, it was I who promised,” she admitted, “and at that time I would have gone to you without a sign. But there are some things that

are more binding even than an oath. I do not love you, Egor, and you yourself would not want me, would you, when you knew that my heart was given to another man?" He cried out sharply, as if the words had brought to him some sudden physical pain, but there was no wavering in the firmness with which he faced her, and his whole air was as full of determination as before.

"Why not?" he said doggedly. "Am I so little of a man that I could not teach you to love me, once I had you for a wife?" She let her eyes go away from him to where his brother stood, and when they came back they were shining with a new and different light.

"You do not understand," she said softly. "There is nothing in the world which could bring me such a change." Egor Strukof's reserve went suddenly to pieces and he threw up his hands in mingled protest and appeal.

"Understand!" he cried. "It is you who do not understand. Can you not see that I would not humble myself and come to you like this if it were not that my whole heart cried out for you, so that I have no happiness in life? Oh, I love you! I need you! I want you so much

that I would rather take you, knowing that your heart was with Luka there instead of with me, than to have any other woman in the world." Lisa Fedorovna moved forward to him impulsively and took both his hands.

"I had no thought that you so really cared," she said. "You did not show it to me in those older days. But, Egor, if the love is real, would you want to ask of me this thing which would make me unhappy all my life?" He crushed her hands in his excitement till she almost cried out with the pain, and his eyes devoured her with a passion that was like a fire.

"You would not be unhappy!" he cried with fierce resentment. "I would fill your life so full that you would forget this other thing, and it would pass!"

"Egor, Egor," she said sadly, "has it passed for you? You know as well as I that it will last for both of us as long as we have life."

"Yes, that is true," he admitted moodily. "It is not because I have not tried to forget you that you still have hold upon my heart." She caught at the advantage as if it had been more.

"Be generous!" she cried. "I know how

wrong it must seem to you that I did what I did. But now, when we both know that even if we came together the union could never make us one, be strong and let me go and work my life out by myself."

"I can not," he said stubbornly, and she saw his eyes turn involuntarily toward his brother with a sudden blaze of hate.

"I know," she said in sympathetic recognition. "It is doubly hard for you when you think I am going to another man. But this too is true, Egor, that, even if I could not go to Luka, I would not give myself to you. I am Luka's and he is mine and, if I lose him, his place in my heart will be consecrate and no man shall ever fill it, while I live." He lifted her hands and stood looking at them in apparent curiosity, bending his head so that she could not see his face. She waited for him to speak and, when he did not, she made shift and spoke again.

"Can you not have the courage, Egor?" she said tremulously. "It is the only way." He hesitated a full moment longer, and then raised her hands farther till they lay against his lips.

"What is it that you want me to do?" he

said, so low that close as she was to him she scarcely heard.

"To give me up," she answered. "To go away and leave me to my life."

"I will do it," he said, and lifted up his head. He still clung convulsively to her hands and his face, as he turned it up to her, was so full of passionate longing that her heart smote her almost to recall.

"Go, in God's name!" she said solemnly, and bending forward she kissed him on the lips. He let go of her hands and stood back from her, his face transfigured by the renunciation he was carrying out.

"In God's name!" he repeated, as if the invocation gave some needful consecration to the act. Then with the same even dignity and without turning round, he took up again his retreat and passed out slowly through the door. Lisa Fedorovna remained motionless, where she stood, until he was wholly out of sight. Then the reaction took her and, as she turned, she swayed unsteadily and her face looked worn and tired. Sara Lukievna sprang to her, but she pushed her gently back.

"No, I want Luka," she said softly and

turned to him with eyes that tried pathetically to smile. His arm was round her on the moment and he drew her to him with a thrill that was the sweeter that for the first time she yielded altogether freely to his clasp.

"Oh, you are mine!" he whispered. "Mine before all the world!"

"Are you so sure you love me?" she said. "After all, would you not have been happier if I had never come into your life?"

"A thousand times, no!" he answered. "It is God's choice, as well as mine that you should come to me and, with neither of us, has there been mistake."

THE END

21



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